

## Mirkwood by indiefic

**Category:** Snowpiercer (2013), Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Abortion, Alternate Universe, Anna Gilliam is an original character based on Peggy Carter from the MCU, Anna is in the Joyce role, Curtis is in the Hopper role, Edgar is in the Will role, F/M, Implied/Referenced Rape, Implied/Referenced Sexual Abuse, Past Abuse, Snowpiercer story set in the Stranger Things universe, loss of a child, mentions of past domestic abuse, past Anna/Wilford, past Curtis/Other

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Anna Gilliam, Bob Newby, Curtis Everett, Edgar (Snowpiercer), Gilliam (Snowpiercer), Nam, Tanya (Snowpiercer), Wilford (Snowpiercer)

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**Summary:**

This is a Snowpiercer story centering on Curtis Everett and my original character of Anna Gilliam (based off Peggy Carter from the MCU). But the entire story is set in the Stranger Things universe, with Curtis in the Hopper role, and Anna in the Joyce role.

Curtis has recently returned to Hawkins, IN to take the job of sheriff after many years as a detective in Boston. Anna Gilliam never made it out of Hawkins. She's spent the last twelve years trying to forget Curtis.

# Mirkwood

## Author's Note:

- For [dorrinverrakai1](#).

Happy birthday, dorrinverrakai1!

## Chapter One:

### The Return of Curtis Everett

September 1983

Hawkins, Indiana

Curtis was aware of Tanya standing in the doorway to his office. He tried ignoring her, instead concentrating on his cigarette, and quickly cooling coffee, liberally spiked with bourbon. It was no use.

She cleared her throat loudly and announced, “Chief, someone’s here to see you.” She had a way of saying “Chief” so it sounded like a pejorative.

Curtis winced and looked up. “If they need to file a report, Andrew can take it.”

Tanya crossed her arms over her chest and shook her head. “No report. He’s here to see you.”

Curtis frowned. It was Hawkins. Nothing ever happened. *Ever*. The worst thing that had happened since he’d taken the job four weeks ago was when an owl attacked Eleanor Gillespie because it thought her hair was a nest. He couldn’t imagine what crisis was warranting his attention now. “What the hell do they want?”

Tanya snorted. “Knowing him, not a damn thing but to shoot the shit.” She turned on her heel and left.

Curtis was still trying to make sense of the conversation when an old man appeared in the doorway, a young boy trailing in his wake.

Curtis started at him for several long moments before it clicked. He immediately stood up. “Gilliam.”

John Gilliam smiled broadly and opened his arms, his eyes shiny as he said, “Curtis, my boy. I’ve missed you.”

Without conscious thought, Curtis crossed the small office, ducking to allow Gilliam to pull him close. Curtis was overwhelmed, shaken. Of all the shocks he’d received since returning to Hawkins, this was the biggest. He finally pulled back, laughing nervously, hoping to God he didn’t start crying. Christ, he was a mess.

Curtis took stock of Gilliam, his mood sobering. In the years that Curtis had been gone, Gilliam had aged like a dog. He was thin and hunched, looking decades older than he was. He must have spent years toiling away in that lab, using God only knew what kinds of chemicals. Was he sick? Curtis hoped he wasn’t sick. Jesus. At least his eyes were still bright and he was obviously glad to see Curtis. That was certainly a rare reaction around Hawkins.

Curtis shoved piles of crap off the spare chairs, making room for Gilliam and the boy to sit. Curtis looked at the kid. He was ten, maybe eleven, but small, with a shock of dirty blond hair and a smattering of freckles across his nose. His eyes were bright blue. “And this is?” Curtis asked.

Gilliam patted the boy on the knee, smiling proudly. “This is my grandson, Edgar, Anna’s boy. He just started the sixth grade.”

Curtis nodded, forcing a smile. He should have suspected as much. He knew that Anna had a kid. But the kid sitting next to Gilliam certainly wasn’t what Curtis had expected. The kid didn’t look mistreated or anything, but Edgar looked like he knew what it was to go to bed hungry. The knees on his jeans had clearly been patched several times. The shirt looked like a hand me down. The sneakers, at least, were new.

Since Curtis had returned to Hawkins, he hadn't asked about Anna. He wasn't that much of a masochist. But he'd heard enough around town to know that Anna and Wilford had divorced a while ago. Wilford ran Hawkins lab. He owned half of the town. Even with him and Anna divorced, there was no reason his kid should look like he didn't know where his next meal was coming from.

Gilliam smiled, giving Curtis a coldly appraising look. "So, how is it being back in Hawkins?"

Curtis took a deep breath and then shrugged. "To be honest, it kind of sucks right now."

Gilliam chuckled. "Your predecessors didn't do anything to endear the department to the community," he said darkly. "And you've been gone a long time. People are wondering if you were gone too long."

"What does that mean?" Curtis asked, frowning as he took a drink of his coffee. He'd been born in Hawkins, lived here until he went to college. His mother had moved over to Stratford when she remarried, but it was hardly like they'd left the country.

Gilliam just smiled broadly. He'd always loved ruffling Curtis' feathers. "Boston is a big city, Curtis. We haven't seen you, for what, a dozen years?" He sighed. "And then you show up to take the Chief of Police position that's been vacant for the last two years. It seems like you might have a lot to prove."

"It's not like I was running a knitting circle in Boston, Gilliam," Curtis said waspishly. "I was a homicide detective. Trust me, I can handle Hawkins."

Gilliam's eyes twinkled. "Oh, I have no doubt you are an extremely competent lawman," he said. "But you don't know how to do *this* job. Not yet. However, I'm certain you will figure it out. Probably the hard way."

Curtis gave him a sour look.

Gilliam roared with laughter.

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Days later, Curtis looked from the police report to Tanya and back to the police report. “You’re kidding me, right?”

“No,” she said flatly.

Curtis rubbed the back of his neck and reluctantly reached for his ballcap. He reflexively touched the blue band around his right wrist, reassuring himself it was still there, as he headed outside.

Curtis grew up in Hawkins. He knew small town life. But maybe he had been in Boston too long. The calls he got these days were beyond ridiculous.

Mrs. Newland wanted him to come take a look at her garage. She was sure the hoodlums up the road were stealing from her. Curtis knew, without driving out there, that the hoodlums up the road didn’t have a damn thing to do with it. It was Mrs. Newland’s deadbeat son, Randy, who was responsible for stealing her things, so he could pawn them to buy biker meth out of the back of Carlo’s truck stop up on the interstate.

But this was Hawkins, so Curtis couldn’t just say that. He’d have to find some bullshit way to convince her that he’d take care of it, and then, less discreetly, put the fear of God into Randy. He sure as shit didn’t get paid enough to do this.

“Welcome home,” Tanya said.

Curtis ignored her, climbing into his beat up Bronco. He wondered, for the thousandth time, what the hell he was doing back in Hawkins. Hiding? Waiting to die? He was barely thirty, so odds were he’d have a long wait, unless there was a dramatic uptick in violent crimes, or his personal alcohol consumption. He was more likely to die of boredom.

In high school, Curtis was a football star, good enough to earn a full ride to his dad’s alma mater, Boston College. He thought he had it made for life. The only downside to his plans was that Anna was two

years behind him in school.

Curtis and Anna had been dating since Anna was a freshman. With Anna, Curtis found a connection he'd never found with another partner. Maybe it was because they were just kids. Maybe it was that they were damaged in really similar ways. Curtis's father died when he was really young. Likewise, Anna's mother ran off with a vacuum salesman when she was just a kid. Curtis didn't know why they were so drawn to one another. They clicked. Even when they disagreed, it was still electric between them.

At the time, Curtis hadn't had the perspective to understand how rare that connection was. He was physically attracted to Anna. But more than that, he *liked* her - she was his best friend. She was one of the very few people who always surprised him. She made him laugh, and think. She kept him on his toes and he loved it. He loved her.

Anna was beautiful. Even as a freshman, she attracted a lot of attention. But she had a reputation for being ... *mysterious* was a nice way to put it. Acerbic and vicious were other descriptors that fit. Anna had always believed a good offense was the best defense. She was so physically attractive that most people cut her some slack. But she was isolated. People tended to avoid her, and underestimate her.

Curtis always like a challenge. And once he convinced Anna to actually talk to him, he found she had a razor sharp wit and dark sense of humor that fit very well with his own. They were inseparable. They were family. Gilliam was like the father Curtis never had. Curtis felt like he belonged somewhere, with someone.

But it all fell apart in the end, just like everything else in Curtis's life. Well, it didn't fall apart. Curtis fucked it up. As usual.

Curtis loved Anna. And he was pretty damn sure she loved him too. But they were kids, and they were stupid. Anna was a hothead. Curtis was an idiot, too young and reckless to realize what he had, so sure they had limitless time to figure things out.

Once he went away to school, they tried to make the long distance thing work, but it was a strain. They both grew up poor. Even saving up enough money to make a long distance call was a lot of

effort. They managed to get through the first semester, but when Curtis came home for Christmas break, it was obvious things had changed.

Hawkins seemed so small. Even his mom was moving on. She'd finally decided to make things official with Melvin. They had been discreetly, his mom called it 'courting', for years. But with Curtis finally out of the house, Mel had popped the question and Curtis's mother, Mary, accepted. They were getting married, and Mary was selling the house and moving to Stratford, to live with Mel. Curtis felt untethered. He and Anna spent the entire winter break fucking and fighting, sometimes at the same time. When he left, she told him she hoped she never saw him again.

Newly single, Curtis did his best to not dwell on things between him and Anna. His life in Boston was kaleidoscoping. So many opportunities. Everything was new. It was one thing to be a star in Hawkins, it was something else entirely to be a star on a college team. It could take him anywhere.

Curtis partied too much, but so did all the other guys on the team. He still managed to make it to class. His grades were satisfactory, if not stellar. Whenever he thought of Anna, he figured they'd find a way to patch it up. Someday. He'd go home over the summer and they'd figure it out. She only had one year of school left. They'd make it work. But in the meantime, he intended to enjoy his freedom.

What he didn't know was that Anna had worked double shifts at the diner for months, saving her money for a bus ticket. Over her spring break, she spent nearly two days on a Greyhound to come see him.

Curtis wasn't expecting her. It wasn't a good time.

As was usual for a Saturday night, there was a party in their dorm. There was a girl, Patty, who hung around a lot. Patty was different, in every way, from Anna. She was petite and blonde, with an easy smile and relentlessly sunny disposition. Her family was phenomenally wealthy, east coast. Curtis had slept with her a few times, nothing serious. It was casual. They weren't dating. They were both sleeping with other people.

Anna caught them in bed.

Anna had always been a spitfire, but Jesus. She went nuts. She kicked Patty in the face, broke her nose. She elbowed Curtis, chipping one of his teeth. Someone called the cops. Patty's family showed up. They didn't press charges because they didn't want the publicity, but it was a zoo.

It was nearly dawn when Curtis and Anna were finally alone. The hell of it was he was so glad to see her. He hadn't realized until that moment, just how much he had missed her. But it was clear Anna was done with him. She refused to speak to him at all, no matter how much he begged.

He took her to the bus station as soon as it opened. She changed her ticket. Curtis waited, hoping she would change her mind as well and talk to him, but she didn't. She just sat there, tight lipped, her eyes red rimmed. He was still standing there, watching as her bus left, bound for Hawkins.

He tried to call. Hell, he even tried to write. But it was over. He might as well have been dead as far as Anna was concerned. Actually, he was pretty sure she would prefer it if was dead. There was an absolute finality to things that hadn't been there after Christmas. They were done. He wasn't going to get her back.

So Curtis did what any healthy red blooded young American man would do, he proceeded to drink like a fish and screw everything that moved. It was such a good time that he could almost forget how miserable he was. By the time summer vacation arrived, he could go a week without thinking about Anna. That was good, because that's when he heard she was dropping out of school to marry Richard Wilford. Curtis couldn't imagine the chain of events that led to Anna, a highschool junior, marrying a man nearly her father's age.

Or maybe he could. And none of them were good. Curtis's drinking got worse. He found a summer job outside of Boston and shared a shitty apartment with four other guys from the football team. He never went back to Hawkins again.

Curtis and Patty started hooking up. Patty liked fixer uppers. She



certainly found one in Curtis. She bought him fancy clothes and tried to teach him manners. He could mostly bluff his way through one of the dinners at her parents' country club. But he still drank way too much, made too many stupid decisions, on the field and off.

Junior year of college, he was injured in a game, badly. It was the tail end of a downward spiral. He'd lost track of how many speeches he'd been given about 'wasted potential'. While he was rehabbing for his knee, the doctors found a congenital heart defect. It was nothing as far as Curtis was concerned, but to the coaches, it was a good excuse to cut him, and cut their losses.

So much for the football career. Curtis decided to go ahead and torpedo his life for good. He'd cheated on Patty for years, but he stopped trying to make the barest effort to hide it. She caught him, in bed with a girl. He still didn't know why, but he expected her to be upset, he expected her to break it off and kick him out.

But Patty wasn't Anna. Patty simply pretended it had never happened, and started planning their wedding. Curtis had never felt more alone, but he had no idea what to do. He couldn't ask his dad for advice. He would have loved nothing more than to pick up the phone and talk to Gilliam. But after the way things went down with Anna, Curtis knew he wouldn't be welcome. So, he went along with Patty's plan. They screwed that up too, though. Patty got pregnant. No big, thousand-person wedding. Justice of the peace. Their daughter Sarah was born during Curtis's senior year in college.

With Patty's prodding, Curtis finished his degree. He threw a wrench in Patty's plans by refusing her father's offer of a position in his company. It was a stupid move. Sarah was sick. But the Boston police force had surprisingly good health insurance coverage. Curtis joined the force. He was as shocked as everyone else to realize he was good at it. He was promoted quickly. He made detective the same year they realized just how sick Sarah really was.

In Sarah, Curtis had found some semblance of purpose again. He loved that little girl with everything he had. They knew, several days after she was born, that she had a heart defect. Curtis blamed himself. The doctors assured them that Sarah's heart issues could be random chance, though they did admit that a family history

increased the odds of occurrence. They told Curtis and Patty that it was entirely likely that the condition would correct itself as she grew.

It didn't.

Sarah had her first surgery when she was a year old. And then another when she was two. With each surgery, they thought that was the end of their problems. But it never was. When Sarah was five, she needed a more complex medical intervention. More specialists. More assessments.

It didn't really hit Curtis until the day of the surgery, when he saw the entire team of nurses and doctors, just how serious it really was. Sarah looked so small, sitting in that bed, hooked up to all those machines. Curtis had never felt so helpless in his life.

He held Sarah and read her books, laughed with her. He kissed her and told her it would be okay.

When the doctors told him that Sarah didn't make it, he was completely unprepared.

He didn't remember the first few weeks after she died. The funeral was a blur. He couldn't remember if Patty kicked him out, or if he left, but either way, he ended up in a shitty studio apartment, surrounded by empty bottles.

For years, he worked the worst cases, took the worst shifts. He got written up a half dozen times for using unnecessary violence on suspects in custody. The department finally cut him loose when he threatened his Captain. In Curtis's defense, the guy was an asshole and had it coming. The department didn't care. The union wouldn't even look at his appeal. For months, he sat in his ratty little studio apartment, drinking and smoking, hoping he would die.

When the divorce finally went through, Curtis knew he had to get out of Boston. There were too many reminders of Sarah.

Someone sent him a newspaper clipping of the job posting from Hawkins. In retrospect, Curtis was pretty sure it was Gilliam.

So now he was home. The only problem was, wherever he went,

there he was. He couldn't outrun himself. But he was trying to make it work. There were certainly fewer avenues for self-destruction in Hawkins. And being home reminded him of the man he'd once been, the potential he'd once had. That couldn't be all bad.

So Gilliam stopped by the station most days, bringing the kid. Curtis helped Edgar with his homework even though Gilliam had to be better at elementary math than Curtis. But the kid, for whatever reason, seemed to prefer Curtis's help. He was always watching Curtis. It made Curtis wonder about Wilford even more. Curtis was too chickenshit to ask about Anna, though he was dying to know.

What happened with her and Wilford? But for now, the mystery of Anna and Wilford was going to have to take a backseat to Randy the methhead.

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"It's Thursday night," Tanya said, as she was gathering up her coat to leave for the day.

"Yeah," Curtis said. "Are you going to give me the weather report now?"

Tanya gave him a withering glare. "You need to go over to Melvald's."

He frowned. He didn't even shop at Melvald's. His mother had always preferred Cooper's out by the highway, so that's where Curtis shopped now. "Why would I go over to Melvald's?"

He was glad Tanya wasn't authorized to carry a firearm, because she looked ready to shoot him. "Thursday night is the night that Melvald's empties their safe and takes it to the bank for deposit. Someone from the department always goes over to escort."

"Jesus Christ," Curtis swore. "Seriously?"

Tanya nodded.

Curtis still found himself getting irritated with just how small of a town Hawkins could be at times. “Well, who usually does it?”

“Nam, but he’s not here. You are, Chief.” With that, she left.

Groaning, Curtis pushed himself out of his chair and reached for his coat. It was a crappy night, cold and pissing down rain. He’d rather be in his office, drinking.

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The inside of Melvald’s General Store was exactly the way Curtis remembered it from childhood. It *smelled* the same, like Pine Sol and moldering wood paneling. He watched the last customer, putting her items on the counter, and then stopped in absolute shock.

*Anna .*

She was standing behind the counter, looking right at him, dispassionately, the same way he imagined she’d look at Andrew, or Nam, or a bug on the wall. She turned back to the customer, carefully totaling her bill and then bagging the items. Curtis held the door for the customer and then turned the lock and flipped the sign to Closed.

Anna was standing at the register, arms crossed over her chest, watching him.

“Anna Gilliam,” he said quietly.

“Anna Wilford,” she said flatly. She rolled her eyes, turning away. “Even though I’ve been divorced from the bastard for five years. I still have his name. Costs too damn much to get rid of it.”

Curtis flinched. Way to get off on the wrong foot. He tried to start again. “I, uh ... Tanya said that you need a police escort for the bank deposit.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she said. “It’s going to take me a minute. I have to get

the rest of it from the back.” She looked over at him. “Don’t steal anything.”

He looked at her aghast. “I’m the chief of police.”

She frowned, looking unconvinced. Turning, she walked to the back of the store.

Curtis watched her go. Fuck. *Anna*. He knew that running into her was an inevitability. Hawkins was a small town. But he still wasn’t ready for it. Jesus she looked good. Tall, she was tall. How did he forget that? His memories had made her more ... diminutive. Her hair was longer. She’d matured. She’d been attractive in high school, but now. Jesus.

He took a deep breath. What the hell was she doing working as a cashier at Melvald’s? He tried to keep himself occupied as he waited for Anna to return. But he couldn’t stop the thread of excitement as he saw her walking toward him again. It was the first time he felt excited about anything in as long as he could remember.

Anna, on the other hand, didn’t look excited. She looked tired, worn down. She didn’t even look angry at him, just moderately annoyed, like he was just another obstacle to navigate. Curtis wasn’t sure how to feel about that.

“Can you drive?” Anna asked. “My car won’t start.”

“Sure,” Curtis said, following her outside, and then watching as she locked up the store. She took a pack of cigarettes out of her purse and lit one, walking to his Bronco. She climbed in without waiting, like it was the most normal thing in the world.

With a shrug, Curtis got behind the wheel. If she wasn’t going to make a big deal about their reunion, he might as well not either. At least she was talking to him again. Even if it did take a dozen years. He looked over at her. “So what’s wrong with your car?”

She exhaled, and then flicked her ash out the window. “It’s a piece of shit.”

Frowning, Curtis said, “What, Wilford can’t afford - “ He stopped.

Anna's expression was the same one she'd had right before she kicked Patty in the face a dozen years ago. She finally turned back to look out the windshield, taking another drag off the cigarette. "Wilford isn't part of the equation. Ever . "

"Alright," Curtis said, making a mental note to ask around, once he was out of Anna's earshot.

Seemingly mollified that he wasn't going to ask any more questions about Wilford, Anna pointed up the street. "First National on Third."

Curtis pulled up in front of the bank and Anna went to the night deposit slot. It was chilly and she hurried back to the truck. Pulling the door shut, she looked at him. "I need a ride home."

He nodded. "Where do you live?"

"The old Sattler place on 1450 east."

Curtis raised an eyebrow and nodded. That place used to be a dump. Looking over at Anna, he wondered if it still was. Her ex-husband ran the lab and owned half of town, but both she and her kid looked like they shopped at the Goodwill. He put the Bronco in gear and headed in the right direction.

It was several blocks before Anna spoke. "I'm sorry about your daughter."

Curtis glanced at her and nodded. He reflexively touched the band on his wrist. "Yeah, me too."

"What was her name?"

"Sarah," he said, his voice cracking slightly. He cleared his throat, trying to cover. "She was five when, uh ..." He took a breath, touching the band again. "She was five."

Anna reached over with her gloved hand and touched his arm. Without looking at her, he covered her hand with his own, giving it a squeeze. She allowed the contact for a moment, and then pulled away.

It was several more blocks before she said, "I'm not sorry about your marriage."

Curtis snorted. Truthfully, he would have expected no less. Anna wasn't one to take the high road.

"Bitch," she said under her breath, flicking her cigarette out the window. She shifted in her seat, putting her back against the door, crossing her arms over her chest as she looked at him. "Why are you back, Curtis?"

He looked at her, and then back at the road. "Because I don't know where else to go." The words shocked him, mostly because they were true.

She made an irritated sound, but didn't argue, slumping against the seat. She was quieter when she spoke again. "You were gone a long time."

He nodded. "I know. I'm sorry."

She sighed, twisting in her seat again. This time she lifted her feet, bracing them against the glovebox as she stared out the windshield. Neither of them talked for the rest of the drive. As it turned out, the old Sattler place was just as much of a dump as it had ever been, maybe even more. There was a light on inside and people moving around. Gilliam and the kid? Or maybe Anna had a boyfriend.

As Curtis turned to Anna, she was already out of the truck and heading for the door. She didn't even glance back as she waved to him. "Thanks."

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Curtis interrupted Gilliam's conversation at the diner, looming over him and his breakfast. "We need to talk." The other old farts Gilliam was having breakfast with shot Curtis curious looks.

Several minutes later, they were seated in a booth, which offered a

modicum of privacy. Gilliam gave him a tight smile. “Yes, Curtis?” he said, sounding like a long suffering professor.

“What the hell happened with Anna and Wilford?”

Gilliam’s expression instantly shuttered and he shook his head. “If you want to know about that, you will have to take it up with Anna.”

Curtis frowned. “She won’t talk about it.”

“Then that’s the end of the conversation, I’m afraid,” Gilliam said flatly.

“But - “

“No,” Gilliam said firmly. He leaned in closer. “Anna and Edgar are all I have. If Anna finds out I was talking to anyone about her business, she will cut me out of her life in an instant. Do you hear me? If you want to know, you have to ask her. If she isn’t talking, then you’re out of luck.” He paused, frowning. “I’m not sure she owes you any answers.”

Curtis slumped back against the booth. That much was true enough. But he wanted them anyway.

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The following Thursday, when Nam got up from his desk to head for the door, Curtis stopped him. “I’ll take care of Melvald’s.”

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Curtis could have sworn that when Anna saw him, the corner of her mouth crooked up. It wasn’t a smile, but it was something. She still looked tired. There were shadows under her eyes and her hair was pulled back in a messy ponytail. Melvald’s green smock did little to



flatter her figure, but Curtis still thought she looked great.

He'd done some discreet asking around, after Gilliam shut him out. Anna had been working at Melvald's since she and Wilford broke up. It sounded like she pulled a lot of double shifts, trying to clock as many hours as she could. But it still looked like she was barely making ends meet. Gilliam was with the kid most of the time. As far as anybody knew, Gilliam was on some kind of disability pension, retired from Hawkins lab.

As far as Curtis could find out, Anna wasn't seeing anybody currently. Though she'd apparently dated a few people around town, including the town lawyer, Bob Newby. The same Bob Newby who had started the AV club in highschool. And who Curtis once stuffed into a locker. Curtis also had the impression there might have been something going on with the county sheriff, Doug Franco. Curtis met the guy his first week on the job. Their offices had to work together frequently. The guy seemed like an asshole.

Inside Melvald's, there were two last customers who had to be ushered out. Then Curtis waited while Anna locked up. Her car was apparently fixed, though Curtis was more than a little worried the muffler was going to fall off as he followed her crappy Nova to the bank. He watched her make the deposit.

Then, rather than walking to her own car, she walked to the driver's side of his Bronco and leaned in the window. She bummed a cigarette off him and he lit it for her. She took a drag and then gave him an appraising glance. "Follow me."

Curtis followed. All the way to Jester's. It was a dive bar, just over the county line toward Stratford. The bartender waved to Anna and poured her a whiskey before she even took a seat at the bar.

"Beer," Curtis said.

It was obvious that Anna was a regular. She was friendly with the bartender, but he definitely looked surprised she had company. Whether it was surprise she had company full stop, or that her companion was in uniform, Curtis wasn't certain.

"You usually stop in here after the Thursday deposit?" Curtis asked, taking a drink of his beer.

Anna lit a cigarette and offered Curtis one, which he took. "Sometimes."

Curtis looked at her speculatively. "You usually have company when you do?"

She smiled, but didn't answer, instead, taking another drag off her cigarette. "How's your mom?" she asked. "I never see her since she married Mel."

"Ah, you know," he said. "She's good as she can be, considering how fucked up everything is. I think maybe she's glad I'm back. I helped her clean out the rain gutters on her house the weekend before last. Mel's getting too old to climb a ladder."

Anna looked at him, but he couldn't really read her expression. "I'm sure she's glad you're back," she finally said. "You must have missed you."

He shrugged, taking a drink of beer. "Pat - ... the ex didn't like to come to Indiana. It was easier for Mom to come visit us."

Anna rolled her eyes, stubbed out her cigarette and immediately reached for another. As soon as it was lit, she lifted her glass and downed the contents in a single swallow, motioning for the bartender to pour again.

"Hey," Curtis said softly, "go easy. You're driving."

She looked over at him, smiling widely. It was dazzling. "You going to arrest me, officer?"

"I might," he said.

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Curtis followed Anna back to her house. Just to make sure she made it there safely. He didn't pull into the drive. This time, she looked at him, meeting his eyes before waving and heading into the house.

What the fuck was he doing?

As he drove back to his place, he counted off all the reasons why it would be a terrible idea to get involved with Anna again - not least of all because she could still be holding a grudge and just waiting for the perfect opportunity to stab him. Still, none of that seemed compelling enough to stay away from her. He wasn't afraid of Wilford, or of a mess - obviously. Just look at his life. And he couldn't remember the last time he felt so alive.

He and Anna had talked for a couple of hours. It was easy. They still had similar interests, similar senses of humor. She filled him in on all the town gossip he'd missed while he was gone - so long as it didn't pertain to her. She was cuttngly perceptive, even more than she'd been when they were younger. He told her about being a cop in Boston.

Life had hardened her. It had hardened him too.

Curtis parked the Bronco in front of his run down little shack and stumbled up the stairs in the dark. The place was a dump. It came with the job and as such had been vacant for the last two years, which hadn't done it any favors. The first week he'd been here, he'd had to evict a family of raccoons. Beyond that, he hadn't done much to clean it up. The place was tiny, really just one room. There was a kitchenette in the corner with a hotplate and a noisy fridge. There was a small table with a rickety leg, and a crappy couch that pulled out into a bed. The bathroom was what his mother would have called 'an indoor outhouse', if he'd let her see it. He hadn't. It would upset her too much.

Curtis knew he wasn't what anyone would consider a catch. But maybe Anna's standards were as low as they seemed. Maybe he had a shot. She looked like she could use some distraction as badly at him. And lord knew she could use some help. He definitely didn't have anything better to do with his time.

---

The following Thursday evening, Nam looked up at him, smiling. "Let me guess, you'll take care of Melvald's."

---

Curtis waited in his truck as he watched Anna drop the deposit bag in the slot. She stopped to light a cigarette before walking over to his Bronco, leaning into the open window, bracing her arm against the doorframe. She just looked at him.

He cleared his throat. "You, uh, want to come over?"

She arched an eyebrow. "Come over?"

"Yeah," he said, forcing a laugh, trying to act like it was a casual offer, one he made all the time, when point of fact no one had ever been invited over to the shithole where he lived.

"Come over," he said, "we'll have a drink, smoke a shitton of cigarettes, catch up on gossip, it'll be good."

She took a drag of her cigarette and exhaled. "I thought that place had been condemned."

"Nah," he scoffed. "No, it's great."

She looked completely unconvinced. "Oh really?"

"No," he admitted. "It's fucking awful. Come over anyway. We'll get so drunk we won't care."

She narrowed her eyes, but then took a deep breath. "Fine. I'll follow you."

---

Curtis had tried to clean the place up earlier, but there was only so much you could polish a turd. It was what it was. He did the dishes, and straightened up the ratty old crochet blanket on the bed/couch. That was something.

If Anna was shocked by the state of the place, she didn't show it. She just shook her head and crossed the room to take the bottle of bourbon off the counter. She looked in one of the cabinets, finding two chipped, unmatched coffee mugs. "These clean?"

"Mostly," he qualified.

Rolling her eyes, she sat down at the table. "I suppose the alcohol will kill the germs."

Relieved that she hadn't decided to call the whole thing off, Curtis took a seat at his rickety kitchen table. Anna poured liberally and took a drink, watching Curtis over the rim of the mug. She set the mug down and looked at him. "Tell me a story, Curtis."

"Like what?" he asked, taking a drink.

She frowned into her bourbon. "Something true."

He nodded, taking out a cigarette and lighting it. He searched for a neutral topic, but he figured Anna didn't give a shit about how the Colts were doing, or the city budget. He sighed, going for broke. "I missed you. I didn't even realize how much until I saw you again."

She looked up at him, meeting his gaze, but her expression was unreadable. Slowly, she leaned back in her chair, studying him for so long and so intently that he shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"Now you tell me something," he said, blundering forward, hoping to keep her engaged.

She arched an eyebrow. "Like what?"

Curtis took a deep breath, knowing his next words were either going to move them into something more than just friendly conversation, or blow the whole thing to smithereens. Either way, it would be progress of a kind. "You divorced the richest guy in town. How is it that you live in that dump and work double shifts at Melvald's so you can afford to buy your kid second hand clothes?"

Anna didn't immediately punch him, which Curtis thought was a very positive sign. But she didn't do anything else either. She just sat there, watching him through narrowed eyes, occasionally taking a drag off her cigarette.

Finally, she said, "Edgar was all I wanted out of the divorce, and he's all I got." She shrugged. "If you ask me, I came out ahead."

Curtis couldn't fault her logic. Edgar seemed like a great kid. And Curtis knew what it was like to love a child. He could absolutely believe that Anna thought it was worth it. He nodded. "So why'd you get divorced?"

She smiled, shaking her head. "It's my turn," she said, with a wicked glint in her eye.

Curtis wasn't sure if this was working out better, or worse, than he hoped, but he nodded. "Okay, ask away."

"Why'd pretty Patty leave you?"

"How do you know she left me?"

Anna laughed, a booming, side-splitting laugh. She got herself under control. "Sorry, sorry. But you still have to answer the question."

Curtis snorted and then downed all his bourbon in a swallow and poured himself another. He topped Anna up too. He shook his head, staring at the scarred tabletop. "We got married because of Sarah, and she's the only reason we stayed together. But after she died - "

Curtis shook his head, blinking quickly. He took another drink. "After she died, Patty stopped wanting to put a pretty face on things." He shrugged. "I didn't fight it. She got everything. I got ...," he looked around the inside of his little shack, " *this* ." He was

going for a lighthearted, self-deprecating tone, but his eyes were burning and his throat was tight. It was the first time he'd really talked about it to anyone.

Anna watched him for a moment and then slowly leaned forward, putting her hand over his, giving it a tight squeeze. "Hawkins needs you, Curtis, more than you realize. I think maybe you need Hawkins too."

He nodded, his jaw tight. The place where her hand covered his felt electric. When was the last time he touched anyone skin to skin?

Unable to stop himself, he moved his hand, running his thumb along her wrist. He looked up, smiling bitterly as he met her eyes. "You don't actually believe that. Nobody does."

"I do," she said, with quiet conviction. Then her face quirked into a lopsided grin. "Besides, you can't possibly be worse than the last police chief."

Curtis snorted and Anna laughed outright. In the midst of it, they twined their fingers together.

They eventually stopped laughing. Everything was very quiet and very still. The heat of her hand in his almost burned. Curtis could feel his heart hammering in his chest. He took a deep, shaky breath.

"I missed you, Anna."

She held his gaze. Her expression was soft, but guarded. She watched him for a long time and then seemed to make a decision.

Very deliberately, she pushed herself to her feet and closed the distance between them.

Curtis shifted as she braced her hands against his shoulders.

Carefully, she straddled his seated form, and then sat in his lap, facing him. His hands naturally went to her hips. He couldn't breathe. His chest was so tight.

She moved her hands, gently cupping the sides of his face. She leaned in, pressing her forehead to his. "I'm so sorry about Sarah."

Curtis screwed his eyes shut. He couldn't remember the last time

someone touched him like this, like they really understood what that loss meant. She pulled him close, wrapping her arms around his shoulders as he buried his face against her neck. He was shaking. He couldn't stop. This was *home* .

---

Curtis didn't know how much later it was when he finally had himself under control. He felt wrung out. His arms were wrapped around Anna, holding her to him. God, the way she smelled was so familiar. It felt right in a way that nothing had felt right since he was seventeen years old. One of her hands was at the nape of his neck, sifting through his hair. The other was on his shoulder, absently rubbing, soothing.

She pressed a kiss to his forehead, then to his cheekbone. He turned his head and caught her lips. It was chaste at first, just a brush of lips. Anna pulled back far enough to look him in the eye. She held his gaze for several long moments. Then she nodded, leaning in again, kissing him.

It was cautious at first, just the press of his lips against hers, her breath against his. She was the one who deepened the kiss, touching the seam of his lips with the tip of her tongue. He gasped and she immediately shifted, kissing him harder. His fingertips bit into her hips, pulling her closer.

Then she was pulling away, standing up. He waited, watching her. He was breathing hard, his lips still tingling, the taste of her on his tongue.

She was breathing hard too. She took a deep breath and scraped her hair back from her face, staring at nothing. She finally turned to him, looking resolved. She nodded to the bed, only feet away.

---



Curtis wasted no time getting to his feet, nodding. He didn't seem to know whether to guide her there or follow. In the end, she solved the dilemma by walking over to the bed and kicking off her shoes. He seemed relieved. She shrugged out of her jacket.

Anna tried not to look too closely at the interior of his sad little house. She tried not to think too hard about what she was doing. This was a mistake. She knew that. But she couldn't deny that she wanted this, more than she'd wanted anything in as long as she could remember.

She glanced at the bed. It was a pull out couch, and bound to be lumpy as hell. But it was made. He'd cleaned. Curtis was not, by nature, a tidy individual. He was trying to impress her. She couldn't remember the last time anyone tried to impress her.

He turned toward her and she cautiously moved her hand to his waist, tucking her finger into one of his beltloops. All of the awkward anticipation had returned. It was slightly dimmer here, away from the light over the table. That helped. He pulled her close and she went, running her hands over his chest and shoulders. Jesus he still had a nice body. While he was gone, she'd hoped he'd gotten old and soft. But now, she had to admit she was thrilled that he hadn't. She unbuttoned his shirt, and then tugged the tails free. He did her the favor of shrugging out of it completely and then removing his undershirt.

They both sucked in a sharp breath when she pressed her hands against his bare chest. His skin was so hot to the touch. She had forgotten that about him, how hot his skin was. He pressed into her touch like a giant cat. She was more than happy to oblige him, running her hands over his bare skin. God, he felt good. He smelled good, warm and vital. He still wore the same aftershave he'd used in highschool and she wanted to lose herself in the sense memory of him.

He groaned, pulling her closer, grabbing her ass and using the leverage to rub her against him as he kissed her again. She was short of breath, heat pooling low in her belly. Fuck, she wanted him. Grabbing the hem of her shirt, she pulled it over her head. He had her bra unhooked in record time, and it soon joined the shirt on the

floor.

He paused, gently cupping her breasts, rubbing his thumbs across her nipples. She groaned, arching into the touch. Ducking his head, he sucked one of her nipples into his mouth. She hissed, cupping one hand around the back of his head, holding him to her. Her other hand found his belt buckle and proceeded to work it free, and then undo the fly of his pants. He was half hard already, but as soon as she cupped him and started stroking him through his shorts, he sprang to full attention.

With a pop, he released her nipple from his mouth, groaning, “*Anna*.” It made her shiver, hearing the want in his voice, knowing she still had the power to make him feel that.

After that, there was a minor flurry of activity while they both stripped out of the rest of their clothes. Curtis tried to leave his socks on, but Anna forbade it. She made a bit of a show making herself comfortable on the awful mattress. She was lying in the middle of the bed on her back, watching him.

He just stood there, looking at her, and then with a curse, he dropped to his knees at the end of the bed. Anna didn’t know what the hell he was doing, but then he grabbed the bedspread, and her on it, and pulled it all to the end of the bed.

She yelped, and then laughed. And then somehow her left leg was draped over his shoulder and his stubble rough cheek was rubbing against the inside of her thigh. She swallowed thickly. She couldn’t get enough air.

“Jesus Christ,” he cursed.

She flinched, waiting for the humiliation, the pain.

But instead, Curtis groaned, pressing a hot, wet, open mouthed kiss against her inner thigh. “Fuck, I’ve been thinking about you like this for weeks.”

She blinked quickly, staring blindly up at the water stained ceiling. It was *Curtis* .

“So quit thinking and start doing,” she blustered, digging her heel into his back.

He laughed, but leaned forward, obliging her with more kisses, more touches. She relaxed into it. Curtis excelled at continually reminding her who she was with. He was a talker, even when his mouth was engaged in other activities. There was no room for old memories to seep in and poison things. He worked her over slowly, thoroughly, showing he’d learned a few tricks since they were last together.

“Right there,” she hissed, her hands fisting in the covers, “don’t stop.” Curtis didn’t stop, not until the shaking had passed and she was gasping for breath. Exhausted, she let her thigh fall away from his shoulder.

With a groan, and something muttered about his knee, Curtis pushed himself to his feet. He stopped long enough to turn off the kitchen light and then crawled onto the bed. They both rearranged themselves so that they were actually in bed. Curtis pulled her close and then tugged the sheet up around them. Anna could feel him, hard against her belly, but he seemed content with soft touches and kisses for the moment. That was a rarity in her life.

She sighed heavily, pressing as much of herself against him as she could. He was so warm, and young, and strong. So unlike so many of the men she’d been with.

“I told myself I wasn’t going to do this,” she said.

He was running his hand idly up and down her back. “Do what?”

“Fuck you.”

He was quiet for a minute, his hand faltering, and then he said, “That means you thought about it.”

She groaned, rolling onto her back, looking at him in the dim light. “Well, you put so much effort into it. I hated for that to go to waste.” He seemed to be trying to figure out if she was making fun of him. “These are clean sheets, Curtis,” she said pointedly. “Coming from you, this is a highly orchestrated seduction.”

He laughed, and then ducked his head, kissing her. When he finally pulled back, he said, "Yeah, but you like it."

"You're lucky I like it," she informed him.

He laughed again and then kissed her. The kisses were more insistent this time, his touch meant more to arouse than comfort. "You haven't, actually," he said.

She'd completely lost the thread of the conversation. "Haven't what?"

"Fucked me," he whispered into her ear, before biting down on her earlobe.

"Oh," she said, playing coy. "So your tongue inside me doesn't count, you'd like a more," she reached down, grasping his rigid length in her hand, stroking him, " *traditional* culmination of events?"

" *Anna* ," he whined.

She tugged him over her, parting her legs, and he wasted absolutely no time, sliding home. When he was as far as he could go, he went still. They were both breathing hard. She couldn't believe how much she still wanted him, given that she just got off, but she did. He felt so *good* .

"I missed you," he whispered against her lips.

She kissed him and then rocked her hips, urging him to get moving. He didn't take much convincing.

---

Afterward, he held her. He didn't seem to want to let her go at all. Anna knew he was lonely and depressed. Hell, she was too. But this felt like more than either of them looking for a warm body on a cold night. She felt like it mattered that it was *her* , rather than some other woman. And she knew it sure as hell mattered to her that it

was *Curtis*.

She was probably going to end up regretting this. Just like she regretted the last time she was with him. But she was going to give herself this night. She deserved at least that much. One night to pretend she was someone who got to have these moments.

She and Curtis talked for hours. They made love again. Anna called it fucking, but it wasn't that. She knew the difference. Even if she wouldn't admit it.

She forgot what it was like to laugh with a lover. She forgot that sex could be fun and funny and thoroughly enjoyable. She forgot that a partner's enjoyment could fuel her own. She fell asleep with Curtis's arms wrapped around her.

---

Curtis woke when the bed shifted. In the dim light, he could see Anna sitting up. As she started to swing her legs over the side of the bed, he reached out, placing his hand on her arm.

She paused. When she spoke, her voice was sleep rough and tight. "I have to go. Janice will be by on her paper route. I can't afford for people to see my car parked here."

Curtis rolled over far enough to look at the bedside alarm clock. "Janice won't be by here for an hour. We have time."

Anna snorted. "Easy for you to say. This isn't Boston, Curtis. It's a small town. People talk."

She started to get out of bed and he gently tugged her back down. She let him. He pulled her close, pressing kisses to her collarbone. "No one's going to talk," he assured her. "No one's going to see anything. We have time."

He could feel her fighting with herself. And even he had to admit, the smart move would be for her to leave. She was right, it was a small town, and people sure as hell did talk. He knew that what might be merely frowned on for him, would turn her into more of a pariah than she already was. But Curtis had never really been one to do the smart thing.

With a growl, she kissed him, hard, swinging her leg over him, her hands pinning his shoulders to the bed. "You better make it worth the risk."

He laughed. "You know I will."

---

Anna went home and showered. She looked awful, like she'd been awake all night, which she had. She had hickeys all over her neck, whisker burn pretty much everywhere, and fingerprint bruises on her hips. It definitely wasn't the worst she'd looked after a long night. At least she'd wanted all of this. Still, it was a mistake. Thankfully a scarf would hide most of it.

At breakfast, Father pointedly did not mention the fact that she hadn't come home. It was hardly the first time. Edgar was blissfully unaware. She double checked his spelling for him, and then told him to hurry up and get in the car.

She was taking inventory in the backroom at Melvald's when she heard a noise and turned. Curtis was standing there, watching her. She dusted herself off and straightened up. "Can I help you?"

"Probably," he said, smiling.

He reached for her, and she stepped back, frowning at him.

He looked around. "Nobody's watching. You have one co-worker and she's out front talking to Kathy from the bank about roses."

"Curtis, we can't."

He looked irritated. “Why not? We’re adults. Don’t tell me you didn’t enjoy last night.”

To her eternal mortification, she blushed. He was right. She had enjoyed the hell out of last night. But she shook her head. “It can’t happen again.”

He looked hurt, like someone had kicked his puppy. “Anna,” he said softly.

“Goddammit,” she hissed, blinking back tears. “Don’t make this difficult. You know it was a mistake.”

He shook his head and stepped closer. “I sure as hell don’t know that.”

She put her hands up, ostensibly to push him away, but then she was sliding her arms around his neck and *fucking hell this was not the plan*. They were kissing like they were in high school again, making out under the bleachers between fifth and sixth period. Except they had significantly expanded their repertoire by this point.

Curtis pulled her around the corner and into the dim space between one of the storage units and the wall. She was face first against the bare sheetrock, with Curtis behind her. His mouth was on the nape of her neck, hot and wet. Her pants and underwear were around her ankles and his hands were working her over.

“Come for me, Anna,” he whispered.

She nodded frantically, biting back a cry.

---

Several minutes later, Anna pulled her messy hair back into a ponytail. She brushed cobwebs off the front of her Melvald’s smock. God, what was she doing? Screwing around in the storage room at work. This was a new low. Even for her.

She turned as Curtis moved past her, apparently heading for the door.  
“Are you serious?”

He stopped and looked at her. “What?”

She pointed to the very obvious bulge in his pants.

He sort of shrugged helplessly. “Well ...”

“Oh my God, come over here,” she said.

He did as requested. Rather more brusquely than was strictly necessary, she unbuckled his belt and then unbuttoned his fly. He was quiet and docile, standing there as she did what she pleased. She worked his pants and shorts down his hips and then took him in hand, stroking firmly. He breathed harder.

He was ridiculous. Like he thought he could barge in here and do her over like that and then just walk out with a giant hard on and no one would notice. Leaning over, she took him in her mouth, but then immediately pulled back and looked at him. “Unless you’d rather I didn’t.”

“Oh no, I mean yes, yes, please, yes, do that,” he stammered.

She rolled her eyes, but took him in her mouth again. It didn’t take long, thankfully. Anna’s coworkers were bound to come snooping around before long. As much as Bertha loved roses, she couldn’t talk about them forever, and she was nosy as hell.

Curtis sorted himself out while Anna went to the employee restroom and checked her reflection. When she got back, Curtis was gone. She felt both relieved and irritated. But when she turned to head out onto the floor, he was there, pulling her in for a bruising kiss.

She finally did chase him off this time, doing a decent job of feigning real irritation. After he left, she couldn’t help but smile. This was still a terrible idea. But she’d missed him too.

---



It was just after seven when there was a knock on the door. Anna was cleaning up the supper dishes and Edgar answered the door.

“Curtis!”

Anna nearly dropped the plate. She could hear Edgar and Father invite Curtis in. They all made themselves comfortable in the living room, watching the Friday night movie the local TV station was playing.

When the dishes were done, Anna went and stood in the doorway. Curtis immediately stood up. “Anna.”

She nodded, motioning for him to sit back down. She took a seat on the couch next to Father and pretended to pay attention to the movie. Mostly, she watched how much Edgar watched Curtis. This was going to be a disaster. She knew that Father had been taking Edgar with him when he visited Curtis at the station. Clearly Curtis and Edgar were familiar with one another. And just as obvious was that Edgar was rather enraptured with Curtis. Anna was more than willing to live with the pain of her own mistakes, but she wasn’t about to watch her son pay.

When the movie was finally over, Anna said, “Okay, Edgar. Bed.”

There was much complaining and dragging of feet, but he finally brushed his teeth and went to bed. As soon as he did, Father made a strategic retreat, mumbling about being very tired.

And then it was just Curtis in the recliner, and Anna on the couch, looking at one another.

“You’re mad I came over here,” he said.

“I’m not happy,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest.

He sighed. “I’m friends with your dad and Edgar. And I’m more than friends with you. But I’m not welcome over here?”

She pursed her lips together. Best to get to the point. “I’m resigned

to whatever it is that we have between us, Curtis, but I don't like you around my son."

He looked hurt, and then mad. "What do you think I'm going to do?"

"Be a disappointment."

That one hit home. He flinched, and color flooded his face. Breathing hard, he stood up. But rather than leaving, like she expected, he crossed the room to her. He crouched down in front of her, looking at her, his hands on the couch cushions on either side of her hips. "I know I fucked everything up, Anna," he said quietly. "I know."

She blinked quickly and looked away. All of that was a fucking lifetime ago. How could it still hurt so much?

"Nothing I do can ever make that right," he said. "But I want you in my life. And I'm pretty goddamn sure you want me too."

"You're lonely," she said, hating how her voice cracked.

"Fuck yeah, I'm lonely," he said. "I haven't had a real friend since you left me."

Her head snapped to him. "That was your own damn fault."

He winced. "I know." He glanced up at her. "But it doesn't change it."

Shaking her head, she looked away.

"Look," he said, "I understand how important kids are. I know why you're protective. But I care about Edgar. I'm not going to hurt him. He's a great kid."

"You hurt everyone. You can't help it."

He took a deep breath, frowning. "Give me a chance, Anna. Please."

She shook her head again. "So much happened after you left. Things you don't know about. Things you can't - " Her voice cracked and

she stopped. She regrouped. “Bad things, Curtis. Things that can’t be undone.”

He shook his head, exasperated. “So tell me.”

She shook her head, refusing to speak.

He sighed loudly. “Look, my knee is shit. As much as I want to grovel at your feet, I can’t stay like this much longer.”

She looked at him for a long moment and then snorted, rolling her eyes. He took it for the reprieve it was and moved, sitting next to her on the couch.

After much coaxing, he finally maneuvered it so she was mostly leaning against him. His arm was wrapped around her, holding her. She thawed by degrees, slowly relaxing into him, into whatever this was that they were doing. They talked for a long time, about everything but Anna’s past. There were some mostly chaste kisses, but that was it.

Anna was finally the one to pull away. She hated how difficult it was. She wanted to hold him close, to keep him near. Instead, she said, “It’s late.”

Curtis agreed. Anna walked him to the door and he gave her a kiss. “We’re going to figure out a way to make this work,” he assured her.

She wasn’t convinced, but she nodded.

---

“Is Curtis your boyfriend?” Edgar asked over breakfast.

Anna looked at her son. Across the table, Father was studying the paper so intently, she wondered if he was going to burn a hole through it with his eyes. “He’s my friend,” she said. “Eat your bacon.”

Edgar took a bite of bacon, watching her. "He seems like your boyfriend. I like him better than the last one."

"Oh good," Anna said dryly. "I'm so glad. Eat your bacon."

"He's more fun," Edgar continued, unprompted. "He doesn't treat me like I'm a little kid."

Anna frowned at him. "What does that mean?"

Edgar shrugged, swung his legs back and forth under the table. "Dunno. Just ... he doesn't seem like I'm interrupting him when I talk. He doesn't get mad."

"No, sweetheart," Anna said softly, "I think Curtis likes you a lot." She took a sip of coffee and added, "Mentally you two are the same age."

---

Curtis drove past Melvald's on his way back from lunch. When he saw Anna's car, he stopped and went inside. Bertha looked at him suspiciously, but he just smiled and waved as he headed to where he could see Anna organizing a shelf at the back of the store.

"Hey," he said, as she turned to look at him.

She wiped her hands off on her smock. "Hey."

"I was wondering if you wanted to go out tonight, get something to eat."

She studied him. "Just you and me?"

"Well, we can bring Gilliam and Edgar if you want."

"No," she said quickly. "No, I don't want. What time?"

"I'll pick you up at seven."

She nodded.

---

The station was dead as usual when Curtis returned. Andrew was asleep at his desk. Curtis didn't even care enough to wake him up. He poured himself a cup of coffee and headed to his office. He'd been in there for half an hour when Tanya knocked lightly on the door.

Curtis braced himself for whatever insult she had, but she was just looking at him. Finally, she said, "You're dating Anna Wilford."

Curtis scoffed. "I don't - "

"Janice saw her car parked in front of your house at four in the morning. So you're either dating, or you have some other arrangement."

Curtis snapped his mouth shut. "We're dating. What of it?"

Tanya took a deep breath, looking truly regretful. "I think you're a jackass, but you seem to care about her, and her kid." She shook her head, tapping the folder she was holding against her chest. "Someone's going to say something, when you least expect it, to catch you off guard, and to embarrass her. Small towns are awful sometimes."

Frowning, Curtis said, "I don't understand."

Tanya held out the folder. "Read it, and when you're done, talk to Nam. He worked the case. The worst of it isn't in the file. And his information isn't second hand gossip and spite."

Curtis felt the bottom drop out of his stomach as he looked at the label on the folder: Wilford, Anna

---

Curtis didn't talk to Nam. He couldn't. Not after reading through the file. He knew there were tons of things he was missing. But there was enough. More than enough to get a picture of just how bleak it had been while he was in Boston. He needed to hear it from Anna first.

He hurried home and showered. Try as he might, he couldn't seem to get clean. So many people - men like him - had abused their positions of power, had abused Anna directly. Somehow, he was going to have to get Anna's side of the story.

---

Anna knew something was wrong with Curtis as soon as Edgar led him into the kitchen. She looked at him warily. "You okay?"

He nodded, forcing a smile. "Fine."

Dinner was weird. Curtis refused to say what was wrong, which gave her a very good idea of what it was. It definitely didn't help that people were rubbernecking to get a look at them. Hot gossip in a small town.

Afterward, they went back to Curtis's place. Anna shrugged out of her jacket and tossed her purse down on the table, turning to face him. "Was it Tanya or Nam? Or some concerned citizen, who said something to you?"

Curtis at least did her the courtesy of not playing stupid. "Tanya," he said. "She showed me the police file."

Anna nodded. "Wilford was a vicious sadist," she said. "And I was incredibly young and naive."

He took a step toward her. "Anna - "

She held her hand up. "I know what happened to me, Curtis. I live

with it every day. Everybody in this town knows what happened to me. I see it in their eyes when they look at me. They've all heard. They all think they know." She shook her head, impatiently wiping away tears. She wasn't even upset. She just felt numb.

She took a deep breath. "Wilford did things to me. He let other people do things to me. For years. I had no idea how to make it stop. No one would stand up to him. Father tried. Four of Wilford's goons jumped him after he left work and nearly beat him to death. That's why his health is so poor now. He had to take disability."

Curtis cursed a blue streak under his breath.

"But," Anna continued quickly, "the day Wilford hit Edgar, I went after him with a fireplace poker. Got him good too. Sixty stitches in his scalp. Three puncture wounds. Fractured his arm. He finally let us go."

"I read the file, Anna. You had a broken jaw and you lost the pregnancy."

She nodded. "I had a broken jaw. And an abortion. I don't even know if it was Wilford's. I think it was probably Doug Franco's. Wilford used to loan me out to Franco as repayment for favors Franco did him."

She couldn't tell if Curtis thought that was better, or worse, than his original suspicion. She didn't care. She couldn't change it. It was part of who she was. She did what she had to do and she was alive because of it. Edgar was alive because of it.

She shook her head. "Life without Wilford wasn't easy either. He made sure we left with nothing. Edgar and I were living hand to mouth. That's when Father sold his house. It was still barely enough to scrape by." She looked at Curtis, holding his gaze. "I turned tricks sometimes, when I had no other choice, when the heat got cut in the middle of winter, or Edgar hadn't eaten in two days. I did what I had to do to take care of my family. I see some of my patrons in Melvald's shopping with their wives, who are too good to even look me in the eye."

She paced a tight circle in the middle of the room, filled with restless energy. “I know you think my life is a disaster now, Curtis, but believe me, it’s been worse. And if what I told you is too much, you know where the door is. You certainly won’t be the first to bolt. You got off easy. I didn’t even charge you for the sex.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” he demanded.

She finally looked at him.

He was staring at her, aghast. “I’m not going anywhere,” he said vehemently. “Except maybe over to Wilford’s to beat the asshole to death.”

Anna held up her hand. “No. Absolutely not. Under no circumstances will you start anything with Wilford. That’s over. Your ego will just have to deal with it.”

“It’s not about my ego,” Curtis said through gritted teeth. “That son of a bitch deserves to be rotting in prison.”

“All the same.”

“Goddammit, Anna, will you hold still for a minute?”

She stopped, realizing she was still pacing. She forced herself to take a deep breath, and to stand her ground. Curtis approached her cautiously, holding out his hand. She stared at it for a long time.

Taking a deep breath, she cautiously reached out and put her hand in his. Carefully, he pulled her near.

As he wrapped his arms around her, part of her wanted to rage and scream and fight him, to push him away with everything she had. But, instead, she sank against him, sobbing silently as he held her.

---

They ended up in Curtis’s horrible, lumpy bed, sleeping. She knew



he was angry and guilty. Part of her felt bad for not trying to smooth that over. But she just didn't have it in her. She could barely shoulder what had happened herself, much less make him okay with it.

She knew he thought he wanted a relationship with her. She just wasn't convinced he could actually handle it.

---

Curtis woke when Anna sat up in bed. He reached for her. "Where are you going?"

"I'm getting dressed and you're driving me home," she said. "I can't stay here all night."

He looked at the clock. It was after four. "Janice already knows. The story's out. Come back to bed."

"It's not Janice that I'm worried about," Anna said wryly. "I have to be home before Edgar wakes up." She stood up and continued dressing in the dark.

"Yeah, okay." Curtis sat up, and snagged his trousers off the floor.

---

Curtis pulled into the driveway, and killed the lights, but left the truck running. Anna leaned over and kissed him. It was an intimate kiss, a lover's kiss.

"Can I see you tonight?" Curtis asked.

She nodded. "Come by for supper. Bring dessert."

---

“Curtis is here,” Edgar yelled, bounding for the door. Anna took a sip of her coffee and stirred the pot on the stove. Before long, Curtis was walking into the house, with Edgar at his side, talking at him a mile a minute. To his credit, Curtis actually seemed to be paying attention to what Edgar was saying. Distracted, Curtis absently kissed Anna on the cheek and set the box he was carrying on the counter.

Anna looked at it. “Doughnuts?”

“What?” Curtis asked. “It’s Sunday. It’s the best I could do.”

“What’s wrong with doughnuts, Mom?” Edgar asked, offended on Curtis’s behalf. “Doughnuts are great. Come on Curtis, I need to show you my new game.”

Anna rolled her eyes as Edgar dragged Curtis down the hall.

Half an hour later, Anna called everyone for supper. Curtis and Edgar had been in Edgar’s room the entire time. While Edgar was washing his hands, Curtis wandered into the kitchen, catching Anna around the waist and pulling her close.

“What were you two doing in there?” Anna asked.

“Playing Risk,” Curtis said, sounding pleased. “It’s a classic. I loved that game as a kid.”

She pulled back and looked at him. “You played the whole game?”

“Oh God no,” he said, “it takes hours.”

“Well, I’m glad Edgar invited a playmate over for dinner,” she said sourly.

Curtis chuckled and pulled her close again, kissing her. “Jealous?”

She pinched him in the side and then threatened him with a wooden spoon. He retreated to a safe distance. “It smells great.”

Anna had to send Curtis to get Father. He was in the shed out back, tinkering as usual. And then they all sat down to dinner. As it turned out, the doughnuts were an acceptable, if unconventional, dessert.

Curtis and Edgar did the dishes while Anna and Father drank coffee. The conversation was comfortable and easy. Anna felt like the hard knot in the middle of her chest was starting to loosen the tiniest bit. Maybe Curtis could handle life with them, and everything that entailed.

Once the dishes were done, Edgar had to do the homework he'd been avoiding all weekend. Father made a strategic retreat to his room. Alone at last, Anna and Curtis curled up on the couch together. She was tucked against his side, and his arm was around her shoulders, like it was the most natural thing in the world. Anna still wasn't certain how this had happened. Curtis had neatly inserted himself into their lives, seemingly in a matter of days. And he fit.

"You know, rebound relationships are common," she said.

He made an irritated noise. "You're not a rebound. This is not a rebound."

"It's moving really fast, Curtis."

He shrugged, making an exasperated noise. "What do you want me to do? We have a lot of history. It's not like I can un-know your dad, or Edgar, or that thing you like me to do with my tongue and little finger."

She elbowed him in the ribs.

He grunted, but it devolved into a laugh. Taking a deep breath, he sobered. "I know you're out of your comfort zone, but stop trying to torpedo it because it's going too well."

"I'm not - "

"You are," he said wryly. "You're relentlessly pessimistic. Stop it. I'm not going anywhere."

Anna let it drop. She actually didn't want to chase Curtis off, so there was no point. If he chose to be here, that was on him.

Before long, she had to get up and check Edgar's homework, and then threaten him to get him into the damn shower. By the time he was finally lights out, it was after ten. She looked at the clock, and then at Curtis.

He pulled her close, nuzzling into the space under her ear. "Let me sleep over."

"You can't," she said. "Edgar's here."

"Edgar's not an idiot. He already knows we're together."

She looked at him. "I've never let anyone stay over."

He shrugged. "So I'm the first. I'm honored. Come on, you know this is different than the other guys you've been with."

She sighed. Yeah, it was, especially where Edgar was concerned. "Fine."

---

Curtis dropped the backpack and closed the door to Anna's bedroom, locking it.

"You brought a bag? That's a bit presumptuous."

He shrugged, pulling his shirt over his head. "I was pretty sure the doughnuts would be a big hit."

She rolled her eyes, her head flopping back on the pillow as he stalked up the bed on all fours over her. "Be quiet," she reminded him.

"I'll be quiet," he assured her, not sounding particularly bothered about the idea of being overheard. Ducking his head, he kissed her,

nipping at her lips. She sighed into it, opening her mouth. He immediately deepened the kiss, making her groan. She ran her hands up his sides, fingernails biting into his muscled back. Why did he have to be so attractive?

They both rolled onto their sides, chest to chest. She was still completely dressed, but he was bare to the waist. Her leg was hooked over his hip and they were grinding against one another as they kissed. One of his hands was under her shirt, cupping her breast over her bra, making her arch into the touch.

Then, all at once, he stopped. It took Anna a moment to realize. She pulled back, propping herself up on her elbow. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, no, I'm fine," he said, slightly breathless. "I just want to make sure - " He stopped, frowning, and took a deep breath. "I want to make sure you know that you don't ever have to do anything. Not for me. That's not why I'm here."

She frowned at him. "Are you trying to get out of having sex?"

"Get out?" His brow furrowed.

"The only reason I let you stay over is because I want to get laid," she said.

"Smartass," he said, obviously nonplussed. "I'm serious."

She nodded, her mood sobering. "I know, Curtis. I do."

"Okay, I just want to - "

There was a knock at the door. "*Mom* ."

"Shit." Anna scrambled off the bed. She tossed Curtis his shirt, finger combed her hair and then opened the door.

Edgar was standing there, shaking. She hurried out into the hall with him, pulling the bedroom door shut. He still had nightmares, of their time with Wilford. Anything could bring them up. It wasn't surprising that having Curtis in the house was enough.

She walked Edgar back to his room, tucked him in. She sat with him for a while, talking to him about nightmares, and how they weren't real, but how they were normal. She reminded him that they were safe, and together, and no one could hurt them, not anymore. She finally pressed a kiss to the top of his head and went back to her room.

Curtis, dressed again, was sitting on the edge of the bed. As soon as she entered the room, he stood up. "Is he okay?"

She nodded, sinking down onto the bed. "Nightmares," she said. "They happen sometimes."

Curtis nodded.

There was another knock at the door. "Mom."

Anna opened her mouth, but before she could say anything, Curtis was at the door.

"Hey, buddy, can't sleep? That happens to me all the time too."

Curtis walked Edgar back to his room. Anna wasn't sure what to do. Part of her wanted to order Curtis out, to kick him out of their lives. It wasn't his place to intervene. But another part of her understood that he had a stake in this too, whether he completely grasped it or not. It was obvious he liked kids a lot. He had to miss his daughter beyond reason. Maybe he and Edgar could help each other.

She heard them talking, laughing. Eventually she lay down on the bed, waiting for Curtis to return.

Anna woke up when Curtis crawled into bed. The room was dark, but she was still fully dressed, lying on top of the covers. She looked over at the alarm clock. It was just after midnight. "Were you in there that whole time?" she asked.

"We started playing Risk again," Curtis said sheepishly. "It's hard to find a stopping point."

Anna groaned. "He has school in the morning."

“I know, I know,” he said, his tone placating. “I’m sorry. But he’s asleep now.”

“Yeah? So am I. So much for getting laid.”

Despite her proclamation, by the time she and Curtis were undressed and under the covers, he made a pretty convincing argument for staying up just a bit later. She had to admit, it was worth it.

---

As usual, on Thursday night, Curtis picked Anna up at Melvald’s and they did the bank deposit run. However, this time, they were in his Bronco. They carpooled to work in the morning, and now they were headed home together. Somehow, in less than a week, Curtis had pretty much managed to move in.

Anna still felt uneasy about how quickly things were moving, but she wanted it. It was getting harder and harder to pretend to be indifferent to Curtis, especially when he was so intent on making amends. Part of her knew it was still doomed, but she resolved to enjoy the ride while she could.

When they got back to the house, Curtis recruited Edgar to help him with some repairs to several of the windows, while Anna made supper. The house was old and nights were getting colder. The repairs had needed to be made for years, but Anna always had bigger things to worry about. It was shocking how many things she let slide. Crisis living. That’s what she’d been doing for as long as she could remember.

After dinner, Curtis and Edgar played another of Edgar’s board games. At first Anna thought Curtis was humoring Edgar to make a good impression, but she quickly realized he enjoyed it as much as Edgar. It was both charming and irritating. Her son tended to spend more quality time with her boyfriend than she did.

Edgar hadn’t had any more nightmares since that first night. It had

only been a week though. Edgar didn't tend to process change well. She just hoped that a positive change would be easier for him. So few of the changes he'd weathered had been changes for the better.

---

It was a week before Thanksgiving and Curtis was at the school, checking in on things. He'd discovered that the role of a small town police chief was mostly about making the rounds and talking to people.

As he was leaving, he caught sight of Edgar standing outside the doors to the gym, watching the kids at basketball practice. Somehow Curtis hadn't really thought about Edgar and sports. As far as he knew, the kid didn't play any. But if the look on Edgar's face was any indication, it wasn't for lack of interest.

He went to stand next to Edgar, and watched the other kids run laps in the gym. "So you're not playing?" Curtis asked.

"Can't," Edgar said. "Mom won't let me."

"Ah," Curtis nodded. "Why?"

"I have a condition."

"Oh," Curtis said sagely. "A condition. Sounds serious." Anna had a lot of arbitrary rules, especially where Edgar was concerned.

Edgar glanced up at him, expression sour. "It's a problem with my heart. I was born with it. The doctor says it's no big deal, but Mom won't let me play any sports. She says it's too dangerous." He turned his attention back to the kids in the gym.

Curtis looked at Edgar for a long moment and then blinked. He stared blindly at the kids in the gym, seeing none of them. He looked back at Edgar. "Sonofabitch," he cursed under his breath.

Edgar looked up at him. "Can you talk to her about it? Convince her



to let me play?”

Curtis nodded. “Oh, I’ll definitely talk to her about it.”

---

Anna looked up from the pot she was stirring as the front door closed. She was expecting all three of them, but it was just Curtis. “Where are Father and Edgar?”

Curtis shook his head. “They’re eating at the diner tonight.”

Anna’s brow furrowed. “I don’t understand.”

“To give us some privacy.”

Anna felt a cold dread in the pit of her stomach. Reaching over, she turned the burner off on the stove and then crossed her arms over her chest. “Why exactly would we need privacy to talk?”

Curtis took off his coat and set it over the back of one of the chairs. “Is Edgar my son?”

Anna scoffed. “I don’t - “

“Don’t lie to me,” he said, his voice deathly cold. “I already lost one child. Tell me the truth, Anna. Is Edgar my son?”

She stood there, holding herself, blinking quickly. Finally, she nodded. “Yes.”

“Goddammit,” Curtis swore. He spun around and punched the wall, his fist going right through the sheetrock.

Anna jumped, and then winced, but stayed where she was. She wasn’t afraid that Curtis would physically harm her. But old habits died hard.

Curtis shook his head. “I always wondered why the hell you married

Wilford. I wondered how the hell you managed to get knocked up so quickly. I figured you were like me, you were just drowning yourself in booze and sex, and you got careless.” He looked at her. “But you weren’t, were you? Wilford was a calculated risk.”

“Poorly calculated as it turned out,” she said in a near whisper. “But yes.” She looked up at the ceiling, blinking back tears. “I was seventeen and pregnant, Curtis. You made it clear you had a big, new life in Boston that didn’t include me.”

“Anna, I would have - “

“I didn’t want your fucking pity, Curtis!” She was breathing hard, teeth bared. She forced herself back under control. “I wasn’t going to beg you to take me back, or guilt you about your responsibilities. Edgar and I weren’t going to be a weight around your neck. I got myself into that mess, and I was damn well going to find a way out of it.”

Curtis scrubbed a hand over his face, looking sadder than any person had ever looked. “But Wilford turned out to be a monster.”

Anna nodded. “Yeah, he did. I didn’t see that coming. Not until it was far too late.”

Curtis groaned, and sat down in one of the chairs, holding his head in his hand. He laughed bitterly. “I doubt I ever told you, but the official reason I got dropped from the football team was because of a congenital heart defect.”

Anna’s eyes went wide.

“One like Edgar has,” Curtis continued. He shrugged. “Mine’s nothing. It was an excuse for them to cut their losses.” He shook his head. “Sarah’s was a lot worse. It’s the reason she uh - “ He coughed, stopped. “It’s the reason.”

“*Curtis* .” She crossed the room to him, unsure of what to do. Unsure of what was left to salvage of their relationship now that Curtis knew the truth.

But Curtis didn’t hesitate. He reached out and pulled her close,

wrapping his arms around her waist, burying his face against her belly, clinging to her. She held him, kissing the top of his head, feeling guilty and sad and joyful all at once.

“I just wish you’d told me sooner,” he said, his voice muffled.

She nodded. “I’m sorry. I’m not used to trusting people.”

Taking a deep breath, he stood up. He looked down at her, his expression tight. “I understand why you didn’t tell me at the time, Anna. I do.” He paused, dragging his hand through his hair. “But we’re going to find a way to fix this, as much as we can. When they get back, you’re going to talk to Edgar. And then I’m going to talk to Edgar. And then we’re going to talk to him together.”

Anna shook her head. “I don’t know what to say.”

Curtis shrugged. “I don’t know either, but we’re going to start with the truth.” He held her tighter. “This is our family, Anna. We’re going to find a way to make this work if it kills us.”

---

Anna stared at Edgar, waiting for a reaction. “Edgar? Did you hear what I said?”

“Yeah,” he said, nodding, paying more attention to his book of dinosaurs than he was to her. “Curtis is my real dad.”

She squeezed his hand. “How do you feel about that?”

He shrugged. “I already knew.”

“I don’t - “ Anna started. “ *What ?*”

Edgar looked at her, and then away. “You and Wilford used to fight, all the time. I heard the things he said.” He shrugged again. “And that’s what he used to call me when you weren’t around.”

Anna's insides went cold. All her sacrifice. Everything she'd done to shield Edgar. "Call you what?"

"Everett's bastard," Edgar said blandly. He looked at Anna. "Can I change my name now? I don't like being a Wilford. I'm always at the end of the line for everything."

"Oh, baby," Anna said, pulling him into a fierce hug.

---

Anna didn't think she had ever been as emotionally exhausted as she was by the time she crawled into bed. As Curtis had dictated, she talked to Edgar, then he did. And then they both talked to Edgar together. It was awkward, but necessary. Edgar seemed to be taking it all in stride. His well being was all that mattered, and so far he seemed pleased about the turn of events.

Anna had no idea what the eventual toll was going to be on her relationship with Curtis. For now, he was still here. It was clear he intended to be a real father. She just hoped he could follow through, because if he didn't, it might crush them all. Edgar already loved him so much.

In the dark, Curtis pressed himself against her back, his arm around her hips. He kissed the back of her head. "We're going to get through this, Anna."

She nodded. She wasn't sure she believed they could actually do it, but she wanted it to be true. And she vowed to try and set aside her own fears. She needed to make this work, for Edgar if no one else.

---

Thanksgiving morning dawned bright and clear and cold. Anna looked at herself in the mirror for what felt like the thousandth time.

She looked ridiculous. Who was she trying to fool? She tugged at the drab, ill fitting skirt and the frumpy sweater. She'd been going for respectably boring. Unfortunately, she overshot the mark into background player on Little House on the Prairie. She looked like she should be holding a butter churn.

"Don't be nervous, it will be fine," Curtis said.

"Fuck you 'don't be nervous'," Anna snarled. "You have no idea what it's like. My father likes you better than he likes me."

"My mom loves you," Curtis said, his tone placating.

"She used to *like* me," Anna said. "When I was sixteen. Before I married Wilford and became the town whore. Now she thinks I'm some old hag trying to snare her poor son while he's in a vulnerable position and foist her dysfunctional family on him."

Curtis blinked at her. "You're way overthinking this."

Anna growled at him and pushed past him into the kitchen. He followed.

"It's just dinner."

"It's *Thanksgiving* dinner, Curtis. Even you have to understand that's a big deal. She didn't even know you were dating anyone until two weeks ago. Now you're bringing us all to dinner like a bunch of wayward orphans."

Curtis grabbed a cup out of the cabinet and poured a liberal amount of bourbon into it. He handed it to Anna. "Drink this."

"Why?"

"Because I'm all out of elephant tranquilizers."

"Fuck you." But she drank the bourbon. Much to her irritation, she felt marginally better. "It's a big deal, Curtis."

He cautiously approached, hugging her close and pressing a kiss to her forehead. "It's dinner with my mother and Melvin. You'll be

fine.”

She looked up at him. “Does she know about Edgar?”

He took a deep breath. “She knows he’s coming. She doesn’t know he’s my son. Not yet. I want to have things a bit more ... official, before I tell her.”

She nodded. “You’re going to have to talk to Bob Newby. He’s the only lawyer in town who will even consider a case against Wilford. And he’ll give you a good rate.”

Curtis made a face. “You really dated that guy?”

“Look,” Anna snapped, “Bob was a perfect gentleman. He’s a good guy.”

“He’s a nerd,” Curtis said, frowning.

Anna rolled her eyes. She wasn’t sure what the distinction was, considering how many hours a week Curtis spent playing Risk with Edgar, but she wasn’t going to get into that. “If you want Wilford to terminate his parental rights so you can adopt Edgar, you’re going to have to talk to Bob.”

“Why do I have to adopt my own son?” Curtis grumbled. “He’s *my* son.”

“I didn’t make the stupid law, Curtis. I’m just telling you what it is.”

Father walked into the room, looking at the two of them. “Are you ready? We’re going to be late. And I’m starving.”

---

Anna grew progressively more nervous on the drive over to Stratford. As she expected, Mary and Mel’s house was a charming, tidy little ranch style brick house on a big lot. The landscaping was immaculate. Mary had won numerous competitions for her iris

varieties.

Anna had always liked Curtis's mother. Mary was one of the most genuinely kind people Anna had ever known. Mary truly tried to see the best in everyone. She was a good person. Probably the best person Anna had ever met.

However, after Anna and Curtis had broken up, and especially after Anna had realized she was pregnant, she went out of her way to avoid Mary. She couldn't bear to see the disappointment in Mary's eyes. And then, after everything with Wilford, Anna avoided everyone. She and Mary definitely didn't travel in the same circles. Anna hadn't been inside a church in decades and Mary was a devout worshiper.

This was going to be a disaster.

Curtis knocked on the door and Mary opened it, warmly greeting everyone. She quickly ushered them all inside. Anna was relieved to see that Mary hadn't changed much. She was still the same short blonde woman with round cheeks and sparkling blue eyes. And she seemed genuinely happy to see everyone. Introductions - most re-introductions - were a bit of a jumble.

Anna did notice when Mary caught sight of Edgar. It was like she'd seen a ghost. Mary watched him for several long moments before she showed everyone into the den.

Despite Mary's protests, Curtis mixed drinks for everyone. Mel was beyond thrilled with his highball. Anna suspected he wasn't allowed to indulge very often. He seemed equally thrilled when Curtis turned on the football game, ignoring Mary's tsking.

Anna was too nervous to sit still. And she knew drinking would be a bad idea. She needed to talk to Mary, to see where she stood. She definitely wasn't going to push. It was Mary's home. Anna was lucky to have been invited. But they needed to clear the air.

Anna walked into the kitchen. She knocked on the doorjamb, hoping she wasn't intruding. Mary looked at her, in question. Anna gave her a tight smile. "I thought maybe you could use a hand."

"Of course, dear," Mary said, but she looked away quickly. Anna couldn't figure out if Mary was upset, or uncomfortable. But something wasn't right. Anna wasn't surprised. Anna knew what town gossip had to say about her. And she knew it had to have filtered all the way to Mary over the years. It was no shock Mary found it hard to look Anna in the eye.

"If you could finish the potatoes?" Mary asked, glancing at Anna.

"Certainly," Anna said, forcing a smile.

She stood at the counter next to the pan of drained potatoes, waiting as Mary got the butter and milk out of the fridge. She set them on the counter. Her movements were jerky. She seemed incredibly out of sorts. She stared at the ingredients on the counter and then jumped. "Oh, the masher. You'll need that."

Mary turned and retrieved the masher from one of the drawers. She handed it to Anna and their hands brushed. Mary went still. She looked up at Anna and there were tears standing in her eyes.

Anna just stared at Mary, having no idea what to do. She wanted to dig a hole and crawl into it for intruding on Mary's life like this.

"Oh, *Anna*," Mary said, her voice catching on a sob. All at once, she reached out and hugged Anna tightly, crying.

Not knowing what to do, Anna just stood there.

"I'm so sorry, Anna," Mary sobbed. "If I'd known - " She took a great, gasping breath. "Oh, if I'd known, sweetheart, I would have done something. I didn't think it was my place, but I should have known, I should have - "

Anna patted her on the back. "It's okay. I'm okay."

Mary pulled back, shaking her head vehemently. "It's not okay. It's not." She wiped impatiently at her wet cheeks. "Anna I wouldn't dream of intruding, but that boy, that is - " She stopped and took a deep breath. She leaned in close, her voice a bare whisper, her expression deathly serious. "Anna, Edgar is Curtis's son."



Anna couldn't help it, she laughed. Immediately, she clapped her hand over her mouth, mortified. "Sorry," she said. "I'm sorry. It's just ... yes. I know. We all know."

Mary's brow furrowed. "Curtis knows?"

Anna nodded, sobering. "Yeah," she said. "We've been seeing each other for a couple of months now. He and Edgar figured out they have similar heart issues. Curtis figured out the rest on his own."

"Heart issues? Is Edgar okay?" Mary asked, obviously worried.

"He's fine," Anna assured her. "He's just mad I won't let him play basketball."

Mary smiled, obviously relieved. "Boys."

Anna really didn't want to go into all the sordid details, but she did want to let Mary know what the current situation was, so she said, "Curtis is working on legally becoming Edgar's father." She winced. "I think it's probably going to take some time."

"And Edgar knows?" Mary asked.

Again, Anna nodded. "Edgar knows. He loves Curtis."

Mary looked incredibly relieved. "Well then, that's certainly something to be thankful for." She went still again, covering her mouth with her hand as her eyes welled with tears.

"Mary?"

She gave Anna a watery smile. "I have a gr-grandson."

Right at that moment, Curtis walked into the kitchen. "Do we have any chips?"

Mary turned around with a sob and hugged him tightly.

Curtis returned the hug, but looked at Anna over the top of Mary's head. "You told her. I thought we were waiting."

Anna shook her head. "I didn't tell her anything. She knew."

Curtis frowned. "How could she know?"

Mary pulled back, frowning at her son. "I have eyes, Curtis Michael Everett. That's how. That boy looks just like you."

---

Thanksgiving dinner was phenomenal. Mary was an amazing cook. Everyone was stuffed. Mary spent the entire meal doting on Edgar, which he loved. He'd never had a grandmother and it was clear he intended to milk it for all he could.

After the meal, she prodded Curtis out of his turkey stupor and made him drag boxes out of the basement. The boxes turned out to be boxes of Curtis's toys and games, from when he was a boy. Anna wasn't sure who was more excited about it, Edgar or Curtis. Mel and Father were both sleeping in recliners, pretending to watch football.

Mary got out several old photo albums and showed Curtis's childhood pictures to Anna. Anna knew that Curtis and Edgar bore a passing resemblance to one another, but it was uncanny how much their pictures looked alike. No wonder Mary had known.

The afternoon slowly turned into evening. Far too much pie was consumed. Anna sat on the couch, drinking coffee. Mary took obvious delight in watching Curtis and Edgar sorting through Curtis's old toys. Mary looked like there was no greater joy to be found in this world. Anna sort of had to agree.

It was late when they got home, loaded with leftovers. "Why did your mother give all this to me? Why not give some to you?"

Curtis shrugged. "I told her I'm pretty much living with you."

Anna glared at him. "You did not."

"I did," he said, sounding completely unbothered.

“Jesus, Curtis, we agreed we were going to take it slow.”

He shrugged again. “That was before she took one look at Edgar and knew he was her grandson.” He frowned. “Why are you worried about it? She loves you.”

“She’s not going to love me for long if she thinks I moved you in a week after we got back together,” Anna snapped.

“There’s no way it took a week for me to move in,” Curtis said, smiling wickedly.

Anna smacked at him, but he avoided it neatly. “This isn’t funny,” she said. “It’s important to me that your mother not think I’m awful.”

Curtis took a deep breath, his mood sobering. “Anna, there is literally nothing you could do wrong in her eyes at this point.”

Anna opened her mouth to argue, but Curtis cut her off. “I’m serious,” he said. “After Sarah died. After Patty divorced me.” He sighed, looking truly weary. He scrubbed a hand over his face. “My mom loves me, but she ... wrote me off. I was a disaster. I’m pretty sure she was hoping she would outlive me, but it was far from a foregone conclusion. I was on a grim path with only one possible ending.” He took a deep breath and shrugged, smiling. “But now I have you and Edgar. I have a family. She knows I didn’t do that. You did.”

Anna didn’t know what to say, so she set down the container of mashed potatoes she was holding and crossed the kitchen to Curtis. He was watching her, his lips pressed tightly together. Gently, she took his face in her hands and pulled him close for a kiss. His arms immediately went around her waist, pulling her tightly against him. He leaned into the kiss, deepening it, and Anna threaded her fingers through his hair.

There was a gagging sound and they broke apart, looking at Edgar, who was thoroughly disgusted.

Father swatted him in the back of the head. “You’re not done

bringing things inside. Go on. Make another trip out to the car.”

---

Later that night, Anna was naked, with Curtis curled around her. She had to admit to herself that she did feel grateful. Six months ago, she never could have imagined her life like this. Everything had changed. Hopefully for the better. Part of her couldn't help but wait for the other shoe to drop, but she was trying to pay that part less attention.

She had Curtis here, now. They were building a life together. It wasn't perfect. It might not last forever. But for today, it was enough.

---

The next week, Anna was dragging yet another box of Christmas decorations out of the storage room at Melvald's when she suddenly had to stop. She stood in the middle of the backroom, taking deep breaths. It was no use. She bolted for the bathroom.

She rinsed her mouth out with water and used paper towels to pat it dry. She looked at herself in the water spotted mirror. “Fuck.”

---

Laney, the nurse at Dr. Wilson's office, didn't give her any grief when she stopped in over her lunch hour. She asked the usual questions, when was her last cycle. A long damn time ago. What was she using as protection? A hope and a prayer. Even as Laney drew the blood,

Anna knew what the results were going to be, but she needed it to be official before she said anything to Curtis.

How could they be so stupid? *Again* . Both of them had multiple accidents in the past, you'd think they'd learn. But apparently not. It honestly hadn't even crossed Anna's mind to use prevention. For years, she had tried so vigilantly to avoid another pregnancy. And when circumstances beyond her control had taken that choice from her, she took care of it. But with Curtis, it had been the farthest thing from her mind.

"It will take a few days to get the results back from the hospital lab," Laney said.

Anna nodded. "Thanks."

---

Later that evening, Anna was making dinner. Curtis had picked her up after her shift was over and they went over to the IGA and bought groceries. Truthfully, Curtis bought the groceries. Since he moved in, he'd been giving her the bulk of his paycheck. They needed to get a joint account. It galled Anna that she worked a thousand times harder than he did - all he did all day was drink coffee and drive around and talk to people - and yet he made four times what she did. But at least he didn't try to lord it over her. He gave her the money and let her do what she wanted with it. Not that she had grand plans. She paid bills and bought groceries with his paycheck. It was novel to pay all the bills and still have money left over at the end of the month. She had enough left over to put some away. She knew they'd need it.

Curtis walked up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist, burying his face at the nape of her neck. "We should get blood tests."

For a moment, Anna's heart stopped. Did he know about her visit to Dr. Wilson's office? But then she realized, there was no way he could know. And why would they both need blood tests? "For what?"

“For a marriage license,” he said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

She turned around and looked at him. “Are you serious?”

He looked taken aback. “Why wouldn’t I be serious?”

She just stared at him. “Well, there’s usually the part where someone *proposes* first.”

He took a deep breath, his brow furrowing. “I just screwed this up, didn’t I?”

“A little, yeah,” she said.

“Damn.”

---

That night, in bed, Curtis seemed intent on reminding her why she kept him around. Not that she needed reminding, but she wasn’t about to discourage him.

When they were both sated and sleepy, he pulled her close. “I love you, Anna.”

She knew why it hadn’t occurred to him that he needed to propose. It was the same reason she hadn’t taken precautions against another pregnancy. What they had felt permanent. It felt right. Like a foregone conclusion. She couldn’t remember the last time being with someone felt like this.

She was glad it was dark and he couldn’t see the way her eyes pricked with tears. She couldn’t speak, she didn’t even try. She just curled into him, hoping he understood.

---

Two days later, she was back at Dr. Wilson's office on her lunch hour. This time she was seeing Dr. Wilson, himself, who was looking at her with pursed lips. "You're pregnant," he said. "And your numbers are high." He looked at her meaningfully.

Anna cringed, screwing her eyes shut. Not again.

"I hear you're seeing our new police chief."

Anna didn't say anything, she just sat there, her arms crossed over her chest.

Dr. Wilson sighed, setting down her file. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Anna," he said, kindly, "you know what I'm asking. Are you okay?"

"Yes," she said, meeting and holding his gaze. "I mean, clearly I have an issue with impulse control, but it's fine. This is fine. We're together. Holidays with the in-laws together. It was just an accident. Because we're idiots, apparently."

Dr. Wilson didn't look completely convinced, but he nodded. "Alright then. I want to see you again in a couple of days, to repeat the lab work, but odds are, you're -"

"I know," Anna said, cutting him off.

He frowned. "You're not eighteen this time, Anna," he said. "It may be a lot more physically demanding than you remember."

"Great. That's definitely something to look forward to."

---

"Chief."

Curtis picked up the radio. "What?"

"A request came in for you to swing by Melvald's."

"Roger that."

When Curtis got to Melvald's, he was informed Anna was on break. He found her in the back room, sitting at the little folding table in the break room. She looked serious.

"I'm sorry," Curtis said, "I promise, I'll call Bob and get the process started on Edgar's - "

"That's not why I called Tanya."

Curtis hadn't been worried, but now he was. He pulled out a chair and sat down. As he did that, Anna stood up and started to pace around the little room.

"Do you want more kids?" she asked.

"No," Curtis answered reflexively, wondering what the hell was going on. He knew she was irritated he hadn't talked to Bob fucking Newby. And he knew he'd screwed up the marriage conversation last week.

Anna looked at him. And then she burst into tears.

What the fuck? Curtis jumped to his feet. He took it as a good sign that Anna let him pull her close. She buried her head against his chest, sobbing. He rubbed her back, having absolutely no idea what was going on.

Finally, Anna pulled back. She wiped impatiently at her tears, taking uneven breaths. "I'm pregnant."

"Oh shit."

Her face scrunched up again.

"I mean *I love you* ," Curtis said quickly, pulling her close again. "I love you." He wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. His



lips were against her ear. "I love you, Anna. We'll figure it out."

She shoved at his chest, pushing him back a step, glaring at him. "There's nothing to figure out, Curtis. I'm pregnant, probably with twins, and you don't want them."

"*Twins*?"

She started crying again.

"I want them," he assured her, pulling her close again. "Anna, I want them. I want you, and I want them."

"You do not," she said, her voice muffled from where her face was pressed against his chest. "You just said you didn't want more kids."

"In my defense, a lot has happened since I said that, and I've reconsidered."

She groaned, but leaned into him. "It was twenty seconds ago. You haven't had time to reconsider."

"I thought we were discussing hypotheticals," he said, holding her tightly. "I didn't realize it was current events. My bad. I'm in, Anna. I'm all in."

---

Curtis talked Anna into clocking out early. Bertha was going to cover for her. They went home. Anna was sitting on the end of the bed, looking exhausted, while Curtis rummaged around in the closet. He finally found what he was looking for and took a seat next to her on the end of the bed.

He handed her the small box. She looked at him.

"Open it," he said. "I was going to wait until Christmas, but at this rate, I don't think we can wait any longer."

Anna opened it. It was a ring, just a simple, gold band. Curtis moved, kneeling in front of her. He took her hand. "Will you marry me?"

Unable to speak, she nodded. Curtis took the ring and slipped it on her finger and then kissed her.

He finally pulled back with a sigh. "We can get blood tests this week, and then go to the courthouse next week."

Anna took a deep breath. "You're going to have to tell your mother."

He groaned. "Second shotgun wedding," he said. "She'll be so proud."

Anna shrugged. "My second one as well. Apparently I never learn."

"At least this time you're marrying the father," Curtis said sourly.

Anna rolled her eyes.

They lay down on the bed together, both of them exhausted by the events of the day. Anna was almost to doze off when Curtis asked, "Why do they think it's twins?"

"The amount of pregnancy hormones in my blood are really high for how far along I am," she said. "And Edgar was twins."

Curtis was quiet for a moment and said, "Edgar was twins?"

Anna swallowed thickly and nodded. "The labor was really difficult. I lost a lot of blood. They ended up having to do an emergency c-section. We didn't know it was twins until the surgery. Edgar almost didn't make it. He was so small, and so sick." She took a deep breath. "Jane, was stillborn. I never even got to see her. Wilford took care of the burial before I was even out of the hospital."

Curtis was quiet for a long time, just holding her. Finally, he said, "I'm sorry, Anna."

Anna nodded. "I dream about her sometimes."

---

That night at dinner, Curtis made the announcement to Father and Edgar that he and Anna were getting married. After Edgar had gone into his room to do his homework, Father looked at both of them and said, "You're pregnant, aren't you."

Anna just buried her head in her hands.

"Yeah," Curtis said.

Father sighed, but didn't seem shocked. Curtis knew the feeling.

He excused himself, to go outside and double check some of the sheeting that was coming loose on one of the windows in the master bedroom. He stood outside in the dark, smoking.

He was so accustomed to screwing up, to seeing that look of disappointment on people's faces. It didn't matter that he was in his thirties, he still couldn't manage to do anything in the right order.

He thought he had it right with Anna this time. He thought he was going to make up for last time. But here he was, just screwing it up again. He botched the proposal. And then knocked her up before they could even take care of the wedding.

Another baby. *Shit* . He screwed his eyes shut.

He'd only just found out about the baby she lost - they lost - when Edgar was born. Another little girl, like Sarah, who probably died because of some damn disease that was all Curtis's fault.

And now they were staring down the barrel again. Because he was too damn worried about getting laid to stop and think for five seconds. He was a curse on his children. He hadn't been able to keep any of them safe. What if he couldn't keep the new baby safe? What if it was born sick too?

He scrubbed a hand over his face, cursing himself.

---

Anna took off her ring and put on the hand lotion, smoothing it into her skin. Once it was absorbed, she slipped the ring back on her finger.

Curtis was standing in the doorway, watching her, his brow pinched into a frown. “Why does this keep happening?”

“What?”

Curtis shook his head, his frustration obvious. He’d been in a dark mood all night. “The pregnancies.”

Anna frowned, hurt. “Do you not understand human biology?” she asked sharply.

“I understand biology,” Curtis snapped. He walked into the room, closing the door. He sat down on the bed, with his back to her, taking off his shoes. “I just thought you were taking care of it.”

Anna opened her mouth and then snapped it shut, blinking quickly against the burn of tears in her eyes. He was *blaming* her? Like she was the only one who participated in the conception. “Why would you assume I’m taking care of it?”

He looked at her. “Well ...”

“You asshole!” she snapped, throwing a pillow at him. “Why is it my responsibility to be in charge of the birth control?”

He stood up, turning to face her, his hands held out in front of him in a placating gesture, as if he just realized how he’d been antagonizing her. “Anna, calm down.”

“Fuck you,” she snarled, aware of the tears on her cheeks. “If you were so worried about it, you could have worn a rubber, but you didn’t.”

He frowned, holding up his hands. "Fair enough, okay. Fair enough."

With a huff she turned off the light and rolled away from him, giving him her back. "Asshole."

---

Nobody slept well. Every time Curtis so much as tried to touch Anna, she shoved him away. She hadn't kicked him out of the bedroom, which he had been feeling pretty good about. Until he realized just how financially dependent she and Edgar were on him. Maybe she didn't think she could get rid of him, especially with another baby on the way. Without meaning to, he'd backed her into a corner. He'd already seen what Anna could do when she was backed into a corner. It wasn't pretty. He had to figure out how to fix this.

They went and got blood tests together. Anna still wasn't speaking to him. He tried to apologize for upsetting her, but she just shut him down.

After the blood tests, he dropped her off at work and headed over to Stratford. When Curtis arrived at his mother's house, he found her in the garage, trying to reach something off one of the highest shelves.

"Ma," he barked. "Get down from there. I'll get it."

Mary was shocked to see him, but was more than happy to let him lug down the box.

Curtis frowned the whole time. "Why isn't Mel doing this?"

"His back, dear," she explained patiently. "He can't."

"Then call me," he said pointedly, leaning down to look her in the eye. "The last thing anyone needs is you falling off a ladder and hurting yourself."

She smiled at him. "Yes, dear."

Curtis took the box inside for her and set it on the table as directed. She looked him over cautiously. "Not that I'm not happy to see you, but what's the occasion for your visit?"

Pulling out a chair, Curtis sat down at the table. "Anna and I are getting married next Wednesday at the courthouse."

His mother took a seat as well, her expression guarded. "That's ... very quick."

He nodded. "Anna's pregnant." He scrubbed a hand over his face. "They think it may be twins."

Mary was quiet for several moments and then asked, cautiously. "Are you and Anna okay?"

He looked at his mother.

Her expression was tight. "Are *you* okay, Curtis?"

He shrugged, and then shook his head, blinking quickly. He didn't mean to say it. He didn't mean to say *anything*. He loved his mother, but he'd never really confided in her before. But as soon as he started, he couldn't stop.

He told her about Edgar's twin, the baby Anna lost. Jane.

Mary's expression was somber and sad. "Do they know it was a heart problem?"

Curtis shook his head. "Anna doesn't know what happened. She never saw an official autopsy report, and Wilford never told her." He sighed. "But what else would it be? That's what happened to Sarah. And Edgar has a heart problem too."

Mary took a deep breath and sat there, deep in thought for a moment. Finally, she looked up at him. "Does Anna know you feel this way?"

He shrugged. "I don't know."

She frowned. "Curtis," she said carefully, "you are my only child and

I love you beyond words, but you are going to fuck this up.”

Curtis blinked at his mother in shock. Never, in all of his life, had he ever heard her curse.

Mary took a deep breath. “You’ve been dealt a harsher hand than most by life, but it’s not your fault. You can’t take all that on as your responsibility. It’s chance, Curtis. Random chance. And Anna needs you now, helping her, not feeling sorry for yourself.”

He huffed. “I’m not feeling sorry for myself.”

“Yes you are, dear,” she said dryly. “It’s in your nature. Your father was the same way.”

Curtis opened his mouth, searching impotently for words that wouldn’t come. He finally said, “I’ve lost two children.”

“You lost Sarah,” Mary said sadly. “That was a tragedy. For all of us. I can’t imagine how that must have destroyed you.”

Curtis nodded, looking away. “And Edgar’s twin, Jane.”

“You don’t even know yet what happened with Edgar’s twin,” Mary said firmly. “It is a loss, to be certain. Far more of a loss to Anna, than to you.”

Frowning, Curtis nodded.

“And now you have another pregnancy, and you’ve chosen to see it as a tragedy.”

“I didn’t choose to see it as a tragedy, Ma,” Curtis said, exasperated. “A sixty percent mortality rate is terrible odds. I’m just being realistic.”

“You’re being pessimistic. And self-centered. Stop borrowing trouble. Edgar is fine. This pregnancy may be perfectly fine as well. But nothing is going to be easy if you’re so busy feeling sorry for yourself that you can’t support Anna. She needs you. Edgar needs you. Those babies need you. Pull your head out of your ass and take care of your responsibilities.”

---

Curtis hadn't realized his mother was capable of tough love. He wasn't a fan. Though, he supposed, she had a point, even if he didn't like it. He did need to talk to Anna. Though he wouldn't be able to do that until later that evening.

In the meantime, Mary set him to work doing odds and ends around the house. She made lunch. Afterward, she pointed to several boxes. "Those are for Anna."

Dutifully, Curtis loaded them into the Bronco and headed back to Hawkins. He noticed the card inside, addressed to Anna, but he didn't disturb it.

Back in Hawkins, he checked in at the station. Nothing was going on. So he headed over to Bob Newby's office. As it turned out Bob was available, so he invited Curtis in. The introductions - or reintroductions - were a little awkward.

Curtis didn't beat around the bush. He explained to Bob that he was Edgar's biological father, and that he wanted to make it legal. According to Bob, the process was exactly what Anna had said. As Anna's husband, when Edgar had been born, Wilford was Edgar's presumptive and legal father. Even if a blood test could prove that Curtis was Edgar's father - and it couldn't, not beyond the shadow of a doubt, Curtis and Edgar's blood types were both too common - it wouldn't be enough to establish legal paternity. Curtis would have to adopt Edgar. And Curtis couldn't adopt Edgar until Wilford's parental rights were terminated, either forcibly or willingly.

"The most straightforward route would be to have Wilford relinquish parental rights," Bob explained.

Curtis frowned. "And given what you know of Wilford, and his history with Anna, how likely do you think that is?"

"I think hell would freeze over first," Bob said. He forced a smile.



“But hope springs eternal.”

Curtis groaned. “So what’s the first step?”

“I’ll send a letter to Wilford’s lawyer, relaying the request,” Bob said. “We’ll just have to see what Wilford does from there.”

That wasn’t the answer Curtis wanted, but it was the one he had expected. He sighed. “Yeah, okay.”

Bob made some notes, turned and started jotting something down on his calendar.

“There’s something else,” Curtis said.

Bob looked at him in question.

“When Anna had Edgar, there was a second baby, a twin, Jane, who died.”

“Oh my God,” Bob said in hushed tones. “I had no idea.”

Curtis nodded. “How do I get those records? Anna said she was sick, Edgar was sick. Wilford took care of everything. But I want to see the records. I want to know what really happened.”

Bob nodded. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks,” Curtis said, rising to his feet. He shook Bob’s hand. “I appreciate it.”

---

When Anna and Edgar got home that evening, it was already dark, but she could see Curtis and Father in the backyard, with flood lights set up. Anna went into the house and started dinner, but she looked out the back door.

Curtis was out there, despite the chill, in just a t-shirt and a pair of

worn jeans. He had a shovel and looked smeared with dirt and leaves. Father was considerably more bundled up, but the two were building something, or excavating something. Anna had no idea what they were doing.

Anna had dinner going and she turned her attention to the boxes on the table. There was a card on top, addressed to her. She opened it and smiled. It was from Mary, as were the boxes. She opened them and looked at a few of the items inside. She blinked quickly and shut the boxes. Now was not the time for waterworks.

Anna checked the pots, and then looked in the backyard again. Curtis's t-shirt was plastered to him with sweat. It was criminal that the man should look so attractive. Even as irritated as she was with him, she couldn't deny that he was sinfully handsome. And the sight of a man actually doing work - even if she didn't know what the hell it was for - was incredibly compelling.

It wasn't much longer before Curtis and Father came inside, dousing the lights. Father stamped his feet, rubbing his hands together for warmth. He was only inside for a moment before he headed back out to his shed.

She and Curtis looked at one another.

"It's my fault Jane died," Curtis said, swallowing harshly.

Anna frowned at him. "What?"

He took a deep breath. "That's what I should have said last night. That's what I was thinking. That her death was my fault, just like Sarah's death was my fault. And I'm afraid that something's going to go wrong this time too."

Anna blinked at him, shocked into silence. She'd had no idea that's what he was thinking.

"I should have told you that," he said. "Instead, I got in a fight with you about the pregnancy, because I was scared. I'm sorry."

She was at a loss for what to say. "Curtis, it's not your fault."

He shrugged.

“I’m scared too.”

He crossed the room to her, and started to pull her close before realizing he was all sweaty and covered in dirt. “I just - “ he said lamely, “I’m sorry. I know I fucked up. I’m here for you, and Edgar, and,” he looked at her stomach, “however many babies are in there. I’m here Anna. I promise. I’ll try not to be such an asshole.”

She laughed. God, it was ridiculous. She was exhausted. She knew he had to be as well.

She took his face in her hands and pulled him down for a kiss. “You’re an asshole,” she said. “But I love you.”

He groaned and pulled her in for a hug. She didn’t even complain about the smell, or the dirt. They’d both been through so much. She knew it wasn’t going to be perfect. But it was important that they kept trying.

Curtis finally released her. He got a glass of water while she stirred the pot.

Father came inside again, and this time took off his coat. He sat down at the table with the paper.

Curtis leaned down and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I’m gonna jump in the shower.”

When Anna heard the water running, she looked at Father. “What are you two up to?”

“Ah,” Father said, “I’m moving.”

Anna frowned. “Moving? Moving where?”

“Next door,” he said with a smile. “It’s all plumbed in. There are hookups for electrical, water, and sewer for a trailer house. They just haven’t been used in a while, so Curtis was helping me assess the situation. It looks like some electrical repairs will need to be made, but if all goes to plan, I should be able to get a trailer put in

sometime before Christmas.”

Anna just blinked. “You’re moving out?”

“I’m moving twenty yards away,” Father said. “Besides, with you and Curtis getting married, and with another child on the way, you don’t need me under foot.”

“Well, I - “ Anna stopped and frowned. She really didn’t have any objections. And Father was right. She and Curtis would need the room, not to mention Father probably didn’t want to be in the middle of their business all the time. “I’ll miss you,” she finally said.

He smiled warmly and kissed her on the cheek. “I won’t even be a phone call away, my Anna Banana.”

---

Dinner was good. The conversation was easy and even. Afterward, Edgar went to his room to start his homework. Meanwhile, Father went to his room to start the mammoth undertaking of packing up all his things in preparation for his move.

Anna started clearing the dishes and Curtis stopped her. He set the plates on the counter and pulled her close. She let him. Damn him, he smelled so good. And he felt good. She burrowed against his chest.

“My mom sent those boxes for you.”

Anna nodded. “I saw.”

“What are they?”

“Your baby things,” she said, looking up at him.

He frowned. “She still had them?”

“Apparently. They’re in really good condition.”

Curtis nodded, looking unconvinced. "She sent you a letter too."

"I read it."

"What'd it say?"

"That if Edgar and I ever need a place to go, that we're welcome with her."

"Well that's great," Curtis said sourly. "It's nice to know if we ever break up that you'll get my mother in the settlement."

"She's just being kind," Anna said gently. "And looking out for her grandchildren."

Curtis made an irritated noise but held her tighter. He ducked his head and pressed kisses against her jaw. "I'm sorry," he said. "I was an ass."

"Yes, you were," she agreed.

"I don't ever want you and Edgar going anywhere," he said, kissing her neck. "I want you here, with me."

She threaded her fingers through his hair. He turned his head and caught her lips. She sighed into it.

"Curtis!" Edgar bellowed from his bedroom. "Can you help me with my homework?"

With a groan, Curtis broke off the kiss. He pressed his forehead to Anna's, laughing softly.

"Go on," Anna said. "I need to finish the dishes before the food dries on them."

Curtis gave her an affectionate squeeze. "Later," he promised.

---

Later turned out to be near midnight. Edgar's homework turned out to be more involved than anyone realized, and then Curtis and Father stayed up, trying to plan things out for the trailer installation.

In the meantime, Anna looked through the box of baby things again. Part of her wanted to go ahead and wash the items and sort through them, but another part of her kept in mind the baby she had lost. The blow had definitely been softened by Edgar's birth. But it was still there, in the background. And especially, now that Anna was older, the idea that it could happen again seemed to hang over her. Best to wait.

Anna took a bath, and then settled into bed to read a new novel she'd picked up from the library. It was good, but she was having a hard time keeping her eyes open. Dr. Wilson was right. Being pregnant this time around was different. She was exhausted, bone deep. She didn't think she'd ever been so tired in her life.

When Curtis finally came to bed, he woke her. She'd fallen asleep with the lamp on, and the book open on her lap. Setting the book on the nightstand, she turned off the light, reaching for Curtis. He pulled her close, and she was asleep before he'd even settled.

---

The next several days were a bit of a blur. As promised, Father did get an electrician - Nam - to repair the damage to the hookups. And then he had a trailer installed. Anna had no idea where he found it, or how he had it installed so quickly. But there it was, parked right behind the house.

It was a small trailer, only a single bedroom. But more than enough for Father, who would still eat meals with them and do his laundry in the house.

Curtis and Edgar were spending most of their free time making repairs to Father's old room so that Edgar could move in there. It would afford him slightly more privacy, as it was located at the other

end of the house. The new baby - the follow up blood test showed that it most likely wasn't twins, it was just that Anna was farther along than originally suspected - would get Edgar's old room.

While the boys were busy, Anna managed to find a dress for the wedding. It was as simple as she could find, light blue and white diagonal striped fabric with an A-line, knee-length skirt. The high collar and puff sleeves were not particularly flattering to her. She already had a large chest, and with the pregnancy, it was already expanding. And while there was no sign of a bump yet, her ass and face both felt decidedly rounder. All in all, Anna was not feeling at her most attractive. Her feet were already prone to swelling too. She bought a pair of flats, which, again, did nothing for her, but hopefully would be more comfortable.

Anna was slightly mollified when Mary stopped by and dragged Curtis shopping. It was a suit, off the rack at Penney's. Which, Anna was certain, was all that even Mary could manage. With Curtis's proportions, it really needed to be tailored. But, she assumed Curtis must have put his foot down. So the jacket was wide enough across the shoulders, but it just hung on the rest of him.

The civil ceremony was on a Wednesday morning. Edgar was thrilled to be missing school. Father was there, as were Mary and Mel. But that was it for the guest list. It was short and sweet, and in under an hour, they were legally Mr. and Mrs. Curtis Everett. The biggest perk for Anna was that her last name was no longer Wilford. And she was legally entitled to a portion of Curtis's pension. Afterward, everybody went out for lunch.

Curtis and Anna had agreed to a very small religious ceremony, at Mary's church, followed by a reception. It would be held the Saturday before Christmas, and have a slightly broader guest list. Neither Curtis nor Anna was looking forward to it. But Mary was delighted, which, really, was the whole point.

---

By the time they got home, Anna's feet were swollen. Curtis urged her to put her feet up while he put the dinner Mary had sent home with them in the oven. Edgar was spending the night with Gilliam in his new trailer, and the newlyweds had the house to themselves.

Curtis changed into sweatpants and a ratty old t-shirt, and then sat on the couch with Anna, rubbing her feet. She groaned in delight. "I do not recommend getting older," she said sourly. "Even carrying twins, I barely had any issues until the last trimester, and now," she motioned to herself in frustration. "We're just starting and I'm already a mess."

Curtis smiled. "You're not a mess. You're perfect."

She rolled her eyes, but secretly appreciated the sentiment.

Curtis rubbed her feet, and then up her legs. It was heavenly. He finally helped her off the couch. "Go on," he said, "go change into something comfortable. The food should be ready."

Anna took off the wedding dress, leaving it in a pile on the floor. She wrapped herself in a worn terrycloth robe and went into the bathroom to wash the cosmetics off her face and brush out her hair. Somewhat refreshed, she finally changed into a comfy sweatshirt and a pair of men's pajama bottoms that she'd found buried in a box of Curtis's things when he moved in.

Considerably more comfortable, she went back out to the kitchen. She and Curtis both served themselves plates of food and then they sat on the couch together, watching a movie that was playing on TV. It probably wasn't what most women would think of as a romantic wedding night, but it was exactly what Anna wanted. It was comfortable and easy, and she had Curtis all to herself.

Curtis cleaned up the dishes and then they curled up together on the couch. The movie wasn't terribly interesting, so there was a lot of talking and touching. Kisses became more and more common. They finally gave up on the movie and went into the bedroom.

They weren't sixteen anymore. And they weren't even newly reunited. They had the luxury of taking their time. They undressed



slowly, and then held each other in the darkness. Anna traced her hand over the line of his shoulder and arm, wondering what it would have been like, all those years ago, if she'd told him the truth.

She wasn't naive enough to think that everything would have magically turned out wonderfully. She'd been so young. And Curtis, although slightly older, had still been a kid too. They'd both been disasters. Throw two babies on top of that and - She stopped, taking a deep breath.

"What's wrong?" Curtis said, holding her closer.

She shook her head. "I've just ... been thinking more about Jane," she said quietly. "I'm sure it's just because of the pregnancy. Nerves."

Anna knew there were no guarantees in life. That wasn't how it worked. They just had to do their best and take the punches as they came. But at least for this round, they were together.

She could feel it this time, in her bones. The permanence. Curtis wasn't going anywhere. After all his years of searching, rambling around, boundless, he finally found his home and his heart. It was here, with her and Edgar, and the family they would all build together.

He kissed her, his fingertips tracing over her body like he didn't already know her shape as well as the back of his hand. She shivered, arching into his touch.

"I love you, wife," he said against her lips.

She smiled. It was sappy and ridiculous, but she loved it.

Their recent temporary estrangement had been difficult, and they were both eager to repair their rift, and cement this next step. Their kisses and touches became more insistent, until they each needed more. Anna groaned in relief as they finally moved together.

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Despite the fact that she and Curtis had both taken the day off, they were up at dawn at usual. Edgar had to go to school, which meant the normal morning routine was in effect. Anna's one concession to her status as a newlywed was her refusal to take off her robe and slippers. She sat at the table with her hair in a ponytail, drinking her coffee, as Curtis got dressed.

Edgar, as usual, didn't know where half his homework was, so there was that frantic search. They finally found it in Gilliam's trailer.

Curtis leaned down and gave Anna a kiss before he herded Edgar out to the Bronco, with a promise to return home as soon as he dropped him at school.

Anna enjoyed the several minutes of peace she had. It was so rare that she was home alone. She stood up and walked to the sink to pour out the dregs of her coffee so she could get a fresh cup. She emptied the cup and rinsed it. When she looked up, and out the window that overlooked the backyard, she dropped the cup, only half aware of the sound of it shattering in the sink.

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Curtis was only gone for fifteen minutes - twenty tops. When he walked into the kitchen, he found Anna shivering, her bare feet covered in mud and bleeding.

"What's going on?" he demanded, taking her by the arm.

It took her a minute to realize he was there. She looked up at him. "There was a girl," she said. "In the yard. In the cold. I went out to try and bring her in, but I couldn't find her."

Curtis frowned. "A girl? Outside? This morning?"

Anna nodded.

Curtis shook his head. “How old, did you know her? Was it one of Edgar’s friends?”

Anna opened her mouth and then closed it. She had a pained expression. “Curtis, it was Jane.”

END CHAPTER